



# The Practical or the Purposeful: A Study of Academic Decision-Making Among College Students in an Elite Institutional Context

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**The Practical or the Purposeful: A Study of Academic Decision-Making among  
College Students in an Elite Institutional Context**

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**Howard Gardner  
Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot  
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**A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of the Graduate School of Education of Harvard University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education**

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## **Dedication**

For my family: past, present, and future.

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*Cambridge, Massachusetts  
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Tiffanie Ting

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## Abstract

In this dissertation, I investigate how thirty-nine undergraduates at Harvard College make one of their first consequential, academic decisions in the context of a powerful cultural narrative about the economic purpose of college. By examining students' narratives about their academic decision-making, namely how they chose their concentrations, I seek to understand the underlying rationales behind their choices and relatedly, students' ideas about the purpose of their college education. I focus on sophomores considering Economics – widely considered the most “practical” concentration and also the most popular, and those considering the arts, often considered among the “least useful” by students.

I demonstrate that the dominant cultural view of the economic purpose of college also governs the academic decision-making of participants, reflecting the national norm. Despite their position as students in an elite liberal arts context, participants held this rationale as the basis for justifying and/or undermining their choice of major. Both the economics and arts students reference a shared narrative of “what Harvard students do” that is rooted in economic considerations and notions of achievement and legitimacy associated with their group identity as Harvard students.

I argue that “what Harvard students do” is a shared cognition that has assumed a rule-like status in the context of Harvard. It draws upon a discourse of practicality that involves: 1) a separation between practicality and happiness; 2) a technical rational view of education that privileges quantitative skills and ways of knowing as more practical; 3) pay range expectations that will be “decent” enough to live on comfortably, to pursue hobbies and a certain lifestyle, and 4) a concern for prestige and elite status achieved through competition for particular work opportunities. I examine the ways in which this discourse informs students' conceptions of opportunity and risk and document their strategies for decision-making in relation to this institutional constraint.

Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings for students' conceptions of the legitimacy of a liberal arts education, the impact of achievement culture and the elite admissions process on students' approach to their education, and the dilemma of a group identity based on brand versus community.



## Preface

Learning about undergraduate life at Harvard has been an eye-opening experience. I developed this research interest as a result of having served as a resident tutor for the past six years. Resident tutors play an important role in each of the twelve undergraduate houses for upperclassmen (sophomores to seniors) at Harvard College. They live and dine with the students and provide academic, social, and personal advising. They come from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds and contribute to the vision of the housing experience as one of intergenerational living amongst undergraduates, graduate students, faculty and professionals.

Though I was familiar with Harvard from the perspective of a graduate student, the College itself - while at the center of the University enterprise - can be considered its own ecological sphere. As a tutor, I had the opportunity to learn about the undergraduate experience as an outsider living amongst the students. While many resident tutors are graduates of the College and are therefore already familiar with the system, my inexperience allowed me to approach the work with fresh eyes and a steep learning curve. This research is inspired by my work as a resident tutor. In this role, I have gained on the ground experience as an observer and participant in undergraduate life as a member of Currier House.

Each year, I am assigned six to eight sophomore advisees. Inevitably, I would end up with a mix of arts students and economics students. My own background as an art history major explains my match with the arts students. And since the art majors come in small numbers, I would also be matched with economics students given their disproportionately large numbers in comparison to the number of advisers available with the same background. I noticed in both cases of students how independent they were in pursuing their academic trajectories, particularly in comparison to their pre-med and pre-law counterparts who

participated in much more structured advising. I wondered, where do these students go for additional advice and support? With less defined pathways and end goals, how do they go about navigating their time at college? The idea to investigate economics and arts students' narratives about their decision-making developed from my own experience advising students in these academic areas, and my interest in wanting to know more about their motivations and rationales.

Every September, students re-unite over a meal and strangers meet for the first time in the bustle of the dining hall. The conversations always take flight with a simple question: "how was your summer?" But the answers are anything but standard. Students return from myriad experiences – from participating in archeological digs in Peru, to engineering sustainable energy systems in Uganda; from rigorous internships in finance and banking in the heart of New York City to fundraising and prototyping for their own start-up ventures in California. Their experiences remind me of the unique environment in which I find myself: surrounded by some of the most high achieving, ambitious, and driven students in the world, within the most privileged institution of American higher education. This study is my effort to document the narratives they tell and the meaning they attribute to their education, and how they believe and hope it will shape their present and future lives.

## Chapter 1. Introduction

“[A] lot of young people no longer see the trades and skilled manufacturing as a viable career. But I promise you, folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree.”

- President Obama (cited in Jaschik, 2014)

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, longstanding debates over the purpose of liberal arts education in the United States continue with renewed urgency. As undergraduates at even the most elite colleges worry about establishing financially viable futures, scholars, students, and stakeholders question the prevalence of economic rationales in higher education, which prioritize pragmatic outcomes of college - employability and financial rewards – above the developmental and public dimensions of education.

President Obama’s recent remarks reflect this broader cultural narrative that determines the value of a college degree by economic measures. Though said in the context of promoting job-training initiatives to boost American manufacturing, the President’s framing of studying art history as antithesis to making a decent living perpetuates continued public skepticism over the ‘usefulness’ of liberal arts education. Apologizing for what he describes as an “off the cuff” and “glib remark,” President Obama clarified that his aim was “to encourage young people who may not be predisposed to a four-year college experience to be open to technical training that can lead them to an honorable career” (Schuessler, 2014a). Yet, what he described as a “glib remark” aimed to motivate a certain population of youth actually characterizes a pervasive logic even amongst young people within the most elite institutions of higher learning.

Indeed, it is now a national norm that more students than ever believe the purpose of going to college is “to get a better job” and “to be able to make more money” (CIRP,

2013). In a 2012 national survey of approximately 200,000 freshmen at four-year colleges of varying levels of selectivity, students rank these two factors at an all time high (87.9% and 74.6% respectively) as the most prevalent reasons to go to college. They rank these outcomes as more important than gaining “a general education and appreciation of ideas” (CIRP, 2013). Furthermore, they rank “being very well off financially” at an all time high (81%) as an essential or very important personal goal (CIRP, 2013). These views are undoubtedly reinforced by economically uncertain times since the 2008 financial crisis, which inextricably shape the social reality of current college undergraduates. Indeed, more than ever before, “students entering college in the fall of 2012 believe that the current economic situation significantly affected their college choice, rising to 66.6% in 2012 from 62.1% two years earlier” when the question was first posed on the survey (CIRP, 2013).

According to some researchers, the cultural narrative centered on the economic purpose of college gained renewed emphasis at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when universities became central to supplying a new knowledge-based economy (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). They argue that higher education is increasingly functioning in a “knowledge/learning regime” centered on serving Academic Capitalism over the public good. Academic Capitalism is a framework that “explains the processes by which universities integrate with the new economy” (p.14), in which knowledge is the raw material good, and entrepreneurship the central mode of activity (Mars, Slaughter, & Rhoades, 2008). From this perspective, students are not only socialized through college to become “technologically savvy consumers” (p.20); they are also transformed into commodities for hire, as corporations increasingly require educated workers.

In tandem with the prevalence of higher education’s economic imperative, the percentage of students who regard “acquiring a meaningful philosophy of life” as an

important college outcome has fallen from 79% to 39.6% since 1970 (Bok, 2006, p.26).

Developing a meaningful philosophy of life through “structured learning that aims at human flourishing” (DeNicola, 2012, p.37) is a central tenet of liberal arts education, which encompasses aspects of personal, social, and civic development. Ironically, students’ dramatic shift away from these other elements of education comes at a time of unprecedented efforts to broaden access to liberal arts education previously reserved for the privileged few (AAC&U, 2007). Updated definitions of a liberal approach to education *include* preparing students to engage in the modern global world as productive members of the economy. However, there is concern that an overemphasis on this aspect may come at the cost of the personal, social, and civic dimensions of higher learning. While on the one hand, self-discovery is a uniquely American goal for undergraduate education, its actualization is potentially compromised by pressure to compete with peers from comparable colleges for certain high-paying jobs (DelBanco, 2012).

We might expect that if there were any place where liberal learning could be pursued in an ideal form, it would be within the privileged space of an Ivy League university. By gaining admission, students have already proven themselves as amongst a selective group of high achievers. It is reasonable to think these students might be less constrained by an economic educational rationale than the average undergraduate. This is particularly true at Harvard, where students leave with little to no debt due to generous need-based financial aid scholarships (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014a).

Yet, voices of concern have emerged from these very institutions. Educational historian Ellen Lagemann and former Harvard College Dean, Harry Lewis (2012), caution that if universities are not proactive in defining the public purpose of higher education, they risk being over-run by private interests. In order to challenge the prevalent economic lens,

the authors raise fundamental questions about the role of higher education in shaping socially responsible, well-rounded, and engaged citizens. They ask, “how and to what extent should colleges and institutions of higher education foster a more expansive sense of public responsibility among, for example, young people headed for careers in finance or real estate development?” (p.2). And, what responsibility do these institutions have for fostering development in other societal realms such as the arts?

At Harvard, highly structured advising, influential networks, and the promise of social and financial prestige associated with certain academic and career trajectories make these pathways more appealing over less well-defined or understood trajectories in the arts and humanities. Likewise, Lewis (2006) explains, “many parents see a liberal arts education as the entrée to a bright future in the world of finance, medicine, or law” (p.10). Yet, he and others observe, parents and professors alike seem to have lost sight of the fundamental purpose of college: to create engaged citizens and to develop “people of good character” who seek to contribute back to society for the privileged education they have acquired (Ferrall, 2011; Lewis, 2006). Education Professor Howard Gardner, who has been conducting undergraduate seminars designed to broaden students’ conceptions of self, work, and citizenship asks: “Are Ivy League schools simply becoming selecting mechanisms for Wall Street?” (Rimer, 2008). A recent Harvard graduate describes students’ growing awareness about the same issue: “A lot of students have been asking the question: ‘we came to Harvard as freshmen to change the world, and we’re leaving to become investment bankers — why is this?’” (Rimer, 2008).

How does this prevailing economic view impact how students experience a liberal arts education, especially in a post-2007 context? In this dissertation study, I investigate how thirty-nine undergraduates make one of their first consequential, academic decisions in the

context of a powerful cultural narrative about the economic purpose of college. Using Harvard as my organizational setting, I focus on students considering Economics – widely considered the most “practical” concentration and also the most popular, and those considering the arts, often considered among the “least useful” by students.

I employ the sociological lens of new institutionalism, which views individual decision-making as embedded in cultural and historical frameworks (p.10) and institutions as “shared cognitions” and “conventions” that assume “rule-like status in social thought and action” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p.9). Therefore, I focus on students’ narratives as members within the organization of Harvard College in order to access the cultural narratives at play in the interaction between individual and institution (in the form of the organization, but also in the form of “shared cognitions” and meanings), and examine the ways in which my participants negotiate a sense of purpose within the “practices and arrangements” (p.9) of an elite institutional context.

I use the term elite to characterize an institution that is “deemed to have high status among social groups that have the power to make such judgments” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009b, p.1092). This conception is useful because rather than defining particular contexts as elite in and of themselves, it highlights the connection between individuals and institutions and “the relationship between educational experience and economic status” (Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2010, p.6). As Gaztambide-Fernández (2009b) explains, “the term elite is always defined relative to a particular reference group and set of sometimes more and sometimes less defined criteria...this vagueness is partly related to the fact that different schools have different aims, serve different constituents, and are defined in relation to different reference groups of schools” (p.1092). Furthermore, “the value of an elite education depends partly on the fact that only a few know about and have access to it”

(p.1092). Though the “elite” status of any given institution can be examined and contested, Gaztambide-Fernández (2009b) offers five criteria that can help identify an elite school. Though his framework addresses boarding schools specifically, I believe these criteria are also relevant for identifying elite colleges. They are: typologically elite, scholastically elite, historically elite, geographically elite, and demographically elite (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009b). There is no doubt that Harvard can be identified as an elite institution on these five dimensions. I situate this study about Harvard in the context of a broader system of elite education of which this institution is a part.

Through this in-depth qualitative study, I seek to contribute to knowledge and practice in several ways. At a micro level, I provide insight into the internal logics students develop and apply at this milestone moment of their educational careers. Understanding the ways in which they formulate, doubt, and legitimize their decisions in connection to their sense of self and future can inform approaches to advising for professionals and parents who interact with them on a regular basis. At a macro level, this study contributes to a growing body of research that investigates privilege as a feature of particular institutional settings, and the ways in which institutions influence individual behavior. As part of an increasing awareness of the relationship between privilege and social inequality, it is important to understand the role that educational institutions play in reproducing such power dynamics. I examine how academic decisions, and the opportunities and identities associated with these decisions, are influenced by these dynamics.

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. In the following chapter, I review several bodies of literature that inform the rationale of this study. In chapter 3, I describe the context in which I conducted my study, my role as a researcher in relationship to this context and the participants, and the qualitative methods I used to collect and analyze my



data. Chapters 4-6 offer the findings that emerged from my research, concluding with chapter 7 where I discuss the implications of my work and opportunities for future research.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

### I. The Purpose of College: Liberal Arts Education in an Era of Economic Imperative

College is a distinct and valued American innovation with longstanding significance in the public imagination (DelBanco, 2012). Formulated around liberal learning as a vehicle for democratic citizenship and social mobility, the American college experience uniquely focuses on young peoples' development toward these goals in their transition to adulthood (DelBanco, 2012). College is therefore meant to help students attain "the good life" through self-actualization that includes acquiring learning skills, gaining cultural knowledge, and engaging with the world (DeNicola, 2012). Embedded within these goals are the values of freedom, democracy, autonomy, truth, and moral education that continue to inform liberal learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (DeNicola, 2012).

Historically, liberal arts education was considered an elite, specifically non-vocational curriculum reserved for the privileged few who gained admission to liberal arts colleges or colleges of arts and sciences within larger research universities (AAC&U, 2007). Within these contexts, students would pursue majors in arts and sciences fields and also study a general education curriculum aimed to provide students broad knowledge and perspectives (AAC&U, 2007). Current reform efforts in higher education advocate for liberal arts education as essential for *all* undergraduates to succeed in a global economy, and participate as informed citizens in a democratic society (AAC&U, 2007). While this new, expansive definition encompasses fields of study outside of the traditional arts and sciences, and all types of schools - from community colleges to universities - liberal arts education remains firmly associated with its elite institutions of origin.

Elite undergraduate colleges within "America's great research universities" are considered "the pinnacle of educational opportunity for aspiring young people," where

research, teaching, and learning converge amongst talented faculty and students to create unparalleled educational opportunities (Lewis, 2006, p.xi). Yet, critics suggest that these very institutions are exhibiting a loss of educational mission when it comes to undergraduate education (DelBanco, 2012; Lagemann & Lewis, 2012; Lewis, 2006). Misaligned values and goals within the institution coupled with external forces, particularly market pressure, create conditions for compromised work (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001).

Instead of an unfettered synergistic relationship with the research university, colleges embedded in these contexts are subject to competing interests within the institution that impact the undergraduate experience. For example, undergraduate teaching is considered secondary to research and publishing for faculty; advising, once a central responsibility of faculty, has also been dispersed to administrators, graduate students, and peers; grade inflation reflects a lack of agreement on the purpose of grading as an objective performance measure or gauge of individual progress (Lewis, 2006). Furthermore, the consumer relationship between students and colleges where students are customers of a high-end service mitigates the extent to which colleges can shape students' learning agendas (Lewis, 2006).

Institutional misalignment and the influence of market forces have lead to what some describe as an undergraduate experience based on “unprincipled” breadth and choice regarding what students ought to be learning, as colleges seek to appease their customers and maintain high rankings (Lewis, 2006). Consequently, students perceive the components of their liberal arts curriculum, such as general education and language requirements, as hoops they need to jump through rather than opportunities to expand and develop their knowledge. Increasingly, instrumental views of the purpose of higher education perpetuate anti-intellectual sentiments, and the notion that pursuing non-vocational studies is “self-

indulgent” (Deresiewicz, 2010), a “luxury appropriate primarily for the affluent few...who can afford to delay the necessity of earning a living” (Freedman, 2003, p.55).

These tendencies reflect the growing skepticism, even amongst the wealthy, over the relevance of a liberal arts education in the twenty-first century (Ferral, 2011; Lewis, 2006). Such skepticism is fueled by ongoing criticism against liberal arts education, including claims that its goals are too lofty and unachievable; it is historically entrenched in social reproduction of a privileged class; its moral aims are overly prescriptive; and most saliently, it is disconnected from the needs of the modern workforce (DeNicola, 2012).

Conflicts over the purpose of higher education can be understood by looking at the fundamental but contradictory ideals that shape our collective views of college. Traditionally, liberal arts education encompasses both meritocratic and democratic ideals. From a meritocratic perspective, college serves as a sorting mechanism for employers and professional schools. It is “a four-year intelligence test” that produces a score (G.P.A) measuring students’ “intellectual capacity and productive potential” (Menand, 2011, para. 7) as members of a future workforce. It separates the intellectual elite, by merit, into the high level jobs with higher salaries, thereby reinforcing the idea of the American Dream.

By contrast, from a democratic perspective, college ought to be available to all and serves to socialize individuals from diverse backgrounds, offering them the opportunity to learn and challenge “mainstream norms of reason and taste” (Menand, 2011, para. 9).

College access, and the delivery of a civic-oriented education are fundamental to the democratic ideal. This perspective is at the basis of the Association of American Colleges and Universities re-visioning of liberal arts education in the twenty-first century, which incorporates the liberal ideal into all forms of higher learning, including vocational training, which was previously excluded from liberal arts education by definition (AAC&U, 2007).

A third theory of purpose, the vocational, gained momentum in the 1980s in response to *A Nation at Risk*, a government report warning of the U.S.'s declining economic supremacy due to an underperforming education system (Bok, 2006). A central critique issued by the report was a failure of college to develop an economically competitive workforce. The vocational ideal is viewed by some as a threat to the meritocratic and democratic purposes of college (Menand, 2011). It operates on the assumption that advanced societies require workers with increasingly specialized skill sets, and accounts for the rapid increase of non-liberal arts education, in which college is seen as “a supplier of vocational preparation.” It is this rationale that politicians espouse when referencing higher education as “the key to the future of the American economy” (Menand, 2011, para. 33). As a result, this logic reflecting national priorities has also permeated non-vocational contexts of liberal learning.

The prevalence of economic rationales as the main justification for college has led some researchers to investigate the ways in which research universities have been impacted by market forces. Rhoades and Slaughter (2004) theorize that universities themselves have now entered a “regime” of academic capitalism. This shift is characterized by the ways in which core educational activities are now increasingly organized around revenue generation rather than the “unfettered expansion of knowledge” for the public good (Rhoades & Slaughter, 2004, p.38). Examples of the privatization of knowledge include faculty research with the express goal of patenting, and the creation of curriculum and instruction that can be copyrighted and marketed through venues such as online education (Rhoades & Slaughter, 2004). Within this model, the undergraduate experience is deprioritized, which undoubtedly impacts student learning and student views on the purpose of a college education.

Functioning in institutional contexts embedded in this dominant cultural narrative, it is not

surprising that students might also adopt these very same priorities.

Critics are particularly concerned about the ways in which commercial values might increasingly supersede the fundamental democratic values that college is meant to build upon and perpetuate in educating informed citizens (Bok, 2000, Giroux, 2001). They assert that students immersed in environments that reinforce economic, instrumental views of college are constrained by the belief that capitalism is “the only road to freedom” (Giroux, p.2). Indeed, research has shown that “market permeation and growing student interest in personal wealth have been identified as distractions to student involvement and leadership in social and political movements” (Altbach, 1997, as cited in Mars & Rhoades, 2012, p. 436).

Critical pedagogy theorist Henry Giroux (2001) argues that in order to uphold the democratic and civic dimensions of higher learning, the university should not be reduced merely to its entrepreneurial function, nor should it be a place solely for “pure contemplation.” He argues for a clearer distinction between education and training in the context of non-vocational higher learning— specifically civic education and commercial training. Whereas *civic education* is focused on helping students develop the “capacities, skills, and knowledge” necessary for democratic governance of daily life, the economy, civil society, and the state (p.2), *training* is focused on preparing students for the corporate workforce. While he acknowledges the university “cannot dissolve its commercial ties with the larger society,” he maintains that the primary purpose of college is to educate students for “the demands and responsibilities of leadership, social citizenship, and democratic public life” (p.3). This can only be achieved if higher education is “defended as both a public good and an autonomous sphere for the development of a critical and productive citizenry” (p.2).

Importantly, researchers do not claim that academic capitalism and commercial values have replaced the public dimensions of higher education; rather, these varying ideals

“co-exist, intersect, and overlap” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p.29). It is this co-existence that fuels institutional misalignment and competing interests that *individuals within the institution* must negotiate. With a broader understanding of institutional level purposes and conflicts, I now turn to examine student decision-making about major choice in the context of college.

## **II. Student Decision-making**

Given these conflicting messages about the purpose of college, how do students make decisions about their academics in this uncertain landscape? The desire to achieve a sense of self-efficacy in a particular domain is a part of the drive to attend college and choose a major (Kimweli & Richards, 1999), yet most students arrive at college with only a general sense of what they want to study and a limited view of what careers they might pursue in the future (Arnett, 2004). In order to capture how students develop ideas and goals for their education and beyond, existing research examines students’ academic choices in relation to sources of influence, demographic factors, and approaches to the decision-making process itself. Understanding the components of how these decisions are made is crucial because choosing a major is a significant life decision (Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2008), particularly since “the number one life regret” amongst Americans relate to educational choices (Roesse & Summerville, 2005, p.1276). Researchers have found that “people’s biggest life regrets” reflect “where in life they see their largest opportunities; that is, where they see tangible prospects for change, growth, and renewal” (p.1273). The greater the opportunity, the greater the likelihood people will feel regret that they did not use it optimally. Thus, this research supports the notion that college is a time of unparalleled opportunity and immense pressure for self-definition.

### Sources of influence

Students develop dynamically throughout college in relation to the distinct character of each milestone year. In their longitudinal study of a cohort of approximately 200 Stanford undergraduates, Katchadourian and Boli (1985) found that students characterize freshman year as a time of orientation and transition from high school to college; sophomore year as one that “is burdened by the task of *definition*...a time of uncertainty and choice, disillusionment and reaffirmation” (p.222); junior year is defined by consolidation; and senior year by closure and finalization of plans. During these years, students are making decisions while operating “in a field of temporal forces” (p.78): they are simultaneously influenced by past experiences, the present need to make choices while meeting institutional expectations, and future aspirations.

From the results of their mixed methods study, Katchadourian and Boli (1985) developed a typology of students’ academic orientations based on “the intensity of their commitments to career preparation and liberal learning, and exploration of the implications of that typology for students’ academic and social activities, major and career, choices, and other aspects of their education” (p.222). They found that the extent to which students draw on various sources of influence depends on their academic orientation toward college.

Students classified as “Careerist” and therefore more committed to career preparation over liberal learning tend to be highly influenced by their families; are less involved with faculty; pay close attention to the job market when making decisions; engage in fewer extracurricular activities; and are unlikely to engage in social and political endeavors (Katchadourian & Boli, 1985). They tend to pursue majors in “departments oriented to major professions” (p.223) including economics, biology, and engineering, and aim for corresponding careers in business, medicine, and engineering.



In comparison, students classified as “Intellectuals” tend to pursue areas of study and careers they find intrinsically interesting and are more involved with and influenced by faculty, and less influenced by their parents compared to most students in the study. They tend to pursue majors in the humanities and “interdepartmental programs,” and have a harder time deciding on a career pathway. They are highly involved in co-curricular activities, particularly in social and political-oriented endeavors (Katchadourian & Boli, 1985).

A third type, classified as “Strivers”, attempt to “choose majors that combine intrinsic interest with good career prospects” (p.226). These students are open to choosing from to a wider range of possible majors. They tend to be influenced by both family and faculty: their career-based goals are reinforced by their parents and their intellectual interests and reinforced by faculty. Furthermore, they are subject to additional external influences important to their decision-making, including experiences in courses, peers, and the job market. Finally, the researchers also identify a fourth type, classified as the “Unconnected.” These students tend to isolate themselves from any external influences; for some it is an exercise of independence and for others, it is a product of disinterest. Their decision-making is characterized as “more by default than active choice” and they show the least amount of certainty than any other type (Katchadourian & Boli, 1985).

In a similar vein, a more recent study outlines six influential factors identified by students as important to their decision-making (Beggs et al., 2008). These researchers first employed qualitative interviews with 30 students drawn from a general education course and two marketing courses to identify the six influential factors. Interviews were followed by a survey of 852 undergraduates across all disciplines at a large public university, in which students were asked to rate the relative importance of each factor in the selection of a college major. In order of importance, they found that the most important factor students identified

was whether the area of study matched their interests and strengths. The second related to attributes of the concentration itself, such as the department and faculty reputation. The third and fourth factors were respectively job opportunities and financial outcomes associated with the major. Fifth was psycho-social benefits associated with the major and, the sixth was information about the major obtained from sources such as family and teachers.

The psycho-social benefits are a new and unexpected finding that has not been discussed in existing research. It appears that students are beginning to value the positive emotions they might anticipate as a result of choosing a certain major and future job, such as support from their social network (Beggs et al., 2008). One potentially troubling finding was that students ranked ‘information search’ last on the list of important factors. This is potentially problematic because the three most important factors, ‘match with interests’, ‘major attributes’, and ‘job characteristics,’ all suggest that students have a knowledge base about their majors and related lines of work. Yet, students ranked ‘information search’ of lowest relative importance. The authors write, “we were surprised with how few students mentioned performing comprehensive information searches in support of such a decision...based on these results, it is not clear how, or to what degree, students make informed decisions on selecting their major” (p.7). This study raises important concerns about to what extent students are actually basing this significant life decision on accurate perceptions of fields of study and work.

While it is widely accepted that one important motivation for attending college is to secure a good job (*c.f.* Carduner, Pedak, & Reynolds, 2011; Goldstein, 1974; Robst, 2006), recent shifts toward this emphasis in students’ views of the purpose of college as career preparation have been dramatic (Bok, 2006). The habit of conceiving of major choice as

synonymous with career choice is prevalent in the literature as well as in everyday talk. They are considered “essentially linked”: educational decisions are often discussed as “steps toward implementing career decisions” (Leppel, Williams, & Waldauer, 2001, p. 373).

In a study of interest and future goals as motivation for learning, researchers compared undergraduates studying veterinary medicine vs. the humanities in Finland (Mikkonen, Heikkilä, Ruohoniemi, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2009). They found that “clear future goals” helped veterinarian students remain committed to their studies, particularly when a heavy workload outweighed a sense of interest in the subject matter (p.71). In contrast, students driven mainly by interest in their pursuit of the humanities experienced a sense of diminished commitment due to lack of future goals, despite their high levels of interest. The researchers conclude that “students who have a vision of their future – or, in other words, have clear future goals – are engaged in learning, perform well and persist with their studies” (p.73)

Uncertainty about the future, on the other hand, may even drive students to choose subjects they might be less interested in to avoid the probability of mismatch with a future job. Robst (2006) found that workers with a mismatch between their job and field of study earn less than workers who are “adequately matched” and who have the same amount of schooling. This “wage effect” varies with field of study, but workers graduating from areas that emphasize more general skills – including liberal arts – are more likely to be mismatched.

From an economic perspective, the inability to find employment “reduces the returns to schooling for many majors” (p.406); thus the author encourages students to “consider the potential for finding employment in a job related that major” (p.406) when making a decision about what to study in college.

### **Background, demographics and choice**

An additional subset of research looks at the relationship between students' choices and demographic factors such as socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, and gender with varied results. As traditionally under-privileged groups progressively gain greater access to higher education, this research continues to grow.

According to Katchadourian & Boli's (1985) typology, Careerists are more likely to be men, come from all ethnic backgrounds, and tend to be from upper-middle and middle class status. Intellectuals are more likely to be women from families of very high socio-economic status. They are least likely to come from ethnic minority backgrounds. Men and women are equally likely to be Strivers, and they are more likely to come from a lower socioeconomic status family. Students from ethnic minorities are also more likely to be Strivers than any other type. Finally, Unconnected students are also equally likely to be men or women, varying bi-modally in their socio-economic status (either very high or very low).

In a study investigating whether class-based hierarchies persist in elite contexts, Goldstein (1974) found "no difference between the working-class and upper middle-class students in terms of major subject, grades, plans for further education, career plans, and anticipated satisfaction with various careers" (p.504). He discusses his results in terms of an "institutional effect," explaining how working-class students may have been socialized before and during college into middle class values and behaviors. This, he argues, could account for their success in navigating the selective application process in the first place. Later studies demonstrate at least one way in which socio-economic status *does* matter: Leppel et al. (2001) found that as socio-economic status increases, women in their sample of over 4000 students "became less likely to choose to major in business, while men became more likely to do so" (p.390).

Gender appears to be an important mediating factor in major choice. Dickson's (2010) study on race and gender differences in college major choice found that while race and ethnicity also impacts decision-making, the effect is small compared to gender. For example, they found that overall "women are more likely to declare a major in the humanities and other majors relative to the social sciences at the beginning of their college career" (p.119). Some argue that women's preference for majors such as education and nursing can be attributed to gender role orientation (Lackland & De Lisi, 2001).

Furthermore, researchers investigating the impact of students' previous academic experience on major choice found that students who are highly proficient in math and science in high school are more likely to choose related fields in college. Consequently, students with higher math scores are less likely to choose majors in the humanities or fine arts (Staniec, 2004). Citizenship status is also an interesting factor in relation to choice. Nores (2010) found that foreign born students are more likely to chose "high-return majors" (p.125) in science, engineering, and math, and less likely to pursue the social sciences in comparison to domestic students; however, these differences reduced significantly after legislation reducing the cost of foreign students was introduced in the state in which he conducted his study.

### **Processes of decision-making and the importance of context**

Existing literature primarily examines factors relating to a "rational expectations model," which posits: "students choose majors on the basis of preferences and/or abilities, previous educational attainment, and expected labor market returns under the assumption of rational expectations" (Nores, 2010, p.126). Few studies investigate the decision-making process itself.

One exception is Carduner et al.'s (2011) study of honors college students who identified as still exploring possible majors during their freshman year. They argue that the decision about major choice is continuous rather than categorical, and the process can be conceptualized as involving shifting "degree(s) of decidedness". In other words, making a decision about what to major in is not a matter of being decided or undecided, rather it is a constant process of solidification and /or questioning. They found that students range from being "very decided" to "chronically undecided" about their choices (p.14), confirming that the ability to commit to a choice is itself a demanding developmental task, and therefore one of the most difficult decisions for college students (Carduner et al., 2011, Gordon, 1998).

For high achieving students, indecision may be a particular issue. Carduner et al. (2011) investigate multipotentiality – possessing multiple interests and abilities - amongst this subset of students. Participants considered their multipotentiality as an advantage as well as a disadvantage. Possessing multiple skill sets is positive because of the wide range of options that are available to these students, but is negative because students will inevitably feel they must neglect certain skills when they prioritize others. The researchers observe, "gifted students often believe that they must find the perfect career, one that allows for a high degree of self-actualization and self expression" (p.16). To accommodate their multipotentiality, these students tend to choose broad fields and multiple majors and participate extensively in extracurricular activities.

Furthermore, Carduner et al. (2011) found that students employ a rational choice model in their academic decision-making. This process involves: "exploration of self, exploration of majors (and occupations or world of work), making a decision, and then implementing it," which is often followed by some form of "reality check" and "re-evaluation"(p.15). A lack of knowledge in any of these dimensions can lead to more

uncertainty. In addition to a rational choice process of decision-making, which emphasizes the attainment of self-knowledge and familiarization with major and career options, participants also engaged in alternative strategies. They found that students also consider other factors such as “emotion, intuition, support from others, and experiences” (p.16). Family members and peers were particularly influential, as were prior work experience, happenstance, and emotion.

Referencing alternative strategies to rational choice points to a fundamental question in decision-making theory, namely, to what extent does context influence individual choice? Whereas rational choice theorists focus analysis on “individuals and their strategic calculations,” they do not take into consideration where individual preferences, tastes, and interests come from in the first place (Koeble, 1995, p.232; Powell & DiMaggio, 1983). The sociological lens of new institutionalism addresses this question by re-framing decision-making as a matter of “choice-within-constraints” resulting in a “context-bound rationality,” as opposed to the context-free approach of rational choice theory (Brinton & Nee, 1998, p.xv). New institutionalism considers the “social structural context within which individual interests and group norms develop” (p.xv). From this perspective, individual decision-making is embedded in cultural and historical frameworks, and institutions are conceptualized as “shared cognitions” and “conventions” that assume “rule-like status in social thought and action” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p.9).

Institutions, therefore, are not just an aggregate of individual purposive action as defined in the traditional study of institutions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), but a cultural construct that can “enable or constrain shared definitions and experiences” and influence individual attitudes (Lamont & Small, 2008, p.89). They can take the form of organizations embedded in a local community (for example, schools, colleges, hospitals), as well as more

broadly conceived formal and informal rules, norms, and behavior (for example, the institution of marriage) that “shape the choice-set of actors” and “reduce uncertainty in human relations” (Brinton & Nee, 1998, p.8).

New institutionalism does not deny that individuals have agency and make calculated decisions; but this agency is constrained or encouraged by institutional context. Purposive action and social structure are therefore reciprocally related (Brinton & Nee, 1998). Furthermore, researchers explain that individuals have incentive to align themselves with these institutional norms because “conformity...leads to personal rewards and social esteem due to strength of moral attachment of the community to these norms” (p.7).

College is a complex institution, and it is the context in which undergraduates are embedded as they make decisions about their academics and future career. Subject to a host of ideological and social forces, the choices students make and the rationales they provide can be understood, on the one hand, as a reflection of cultural rules, norms, and values. On the other hand, they also represent strategies of agency, namely how students identify and navigate through institutional paradigms as individuals in the system. The dynamics of how students in elite college settings make decisions is particularly relevant given the relatively sparse scholarship on the relationship between elite education and broader social, cultural, and economic divisions in society (Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2010).

Furthermore, while college in general is viewed as a time and place of unparalleled opportunity, the opportunities and constraints within elite Ivy League colleges may be particularly palpable since they are widely recognized as brands and coveted as status symbols. Recent studies investigating educational privilege and social inequality “move beyond a particular “methodological individualism” that implies an understanding of eliteness situated within individuals...Instead, they address the dynamics of elite education



around the organization of particular institutions and space” (Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2010, p.6). Students who enter these institutions, therefore, are subject to a process of socialization, which undoubtedly factors into their decision-making.

At Harvard, students receive ambivalent messages about the purposes of their schooling. Critics question the purpose behind such a strong pedagogical and philosophical de-emphasis on the vocational aspect of schooling in defense of a liberal arts education. Former dean Harry Lewis describes that while on the one hand, “Harvard portrays employability as antagonistic to the true purposes of a liberal arts education,” on the other hand “the empty curriculum is so removed from the real world that many students learn how capitalist economies create jobs from the solicitation of companies eager to hire them” (Lewis, 2006, p.6).

Formally, the new General Education curriculum “seeks to connect in an explicit way what students learn in Harvard classrooms to life outside the ivied walls” from a liberal arts perspective (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014g). At the same time, a powerful informal curriculum embodied by nearly foolproof support structures for students interested in consulting, finance, law and medicine teach and reify the types of post-graduate opportunities deemed worthy as the next “badge” of accomplishment in the “structure of elite expectations” and choices available to students (Deresiewicz, 2010, para. 16). Within the residential house system, designated tutors assist students in their applications to professional programs - they hold mock interviews, informational sessions, and review resumes and essays. Additionally, elaborate networks of peers and alumni accessed through student organizations introduce and guide students through the steps of entering these prestigious careers. It is important to acknowledge the existence of a formal and informal curriculum because both are promoted by the university through various channels. They

illustrate the conflicting values that a liberal arts college must grapple with (Lewis, 2006).

As admission to elite institutions becomes increasingly competitive, a smaller proportion of undergraduates can gain access to this privileged education. With continued population growth of college-age students and increasing numbers of young people accessing higher education has resulted in a problem of supply and demand at elite institutions. While their applicant pool has exploded, there has not been a proportional increase in acceptance rates (Redding, 2013). For example, the acceptance rate at Harvard in 1985 was 16% compared to just over six percent in 2011 and most recently, 5.9% in 2014 (Paul, 2011; “College Admits Class of ’18,” 2014). Increased competition makes it more difficult than ever to secure a spot, and also reinforces acceptance as a mark of social distinction. How do the fortunate few who do gain admission make sense of and navigate this distinction and educational opportunity?

In this chapter, I have reviewed the literature on the distinct theories of purpose underlying the formulation of American higher education, and the tradition of liberal arts education as it has evolved over time. To examine the prevalence of the economic rationale as a dominant cultural narrative about the purpose of college, I have reviewed literature that examines the influence of market forces on the educational mission of research universities, and the ways in the various theories of purpose, as well as private and public interests co-exist and often collide in these contexts. Having set the broader stage, I then moved from macro to micro, and reviewed the literature on how individuals make decisions in these types of contexts. I examined research discussing various factors that influence students’ decision-making and the decision-making process itself, which is embedded and constrained by context. Finally, I introduced Harvard as an elite organization and discussed the sociological importance of research focused on decision-making and education in contexts of privilege.

Having set the foundation for this study, I now turn to describing the research design and methods.

### Chapter 3. Research Design and Methods

In this study, I investigate the narratives students construct about their academic decision-making in the context of an elite Ivy League college. I explore how they manage varied goals, expectations, and pressures, and how their decisions relate to their ideas about the purpose of education and their future goals. The following questions guide my study: How do undergraduate concentrators in the arts vs. economics at an elite Ivy League college explain their decision-making process in selecting a major? How do they talk about their fields of study in relation to their broader educational experience and future goals? To explore these questions, I conducted a year-long interview study with undergraduates at Harvard College who were in the process of selecting their majors, which are called *concentrations*. In this chapter, I provide a detailed description of the research context, participants, data collection processes, and data analyses.

#### I. Research Context & Participants

##### Harvard College

Volumes have been written about the storied history of Harvard as “the university with arguably the best students, faculty, and libraries, and the greatest impact on America’s intellectual and public life” (Keller & Keller, 2007, p.xiii). Its reputation and illustrious graduates make the Harvard name a ubiquitous symbol of higher learning and elite status around the world. Scholarly and popular literature providing background on this institution are abundant, and so I will focus this section on the current context of Harvard College in terms of how it presents itself and its curriculum to prospective students.

Harvard College is self-described as a “close-knit undergraduate program located within Harvard University” (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014b). Emphasizing “world-class faculty” dedicated to research and teaching combined, the College promises students the opportunity to learn from and contribute to research, while benefitting from the institution’s immense resources “from library and museum collections to engagement in the arts and athletics.” At the foundation of the undergraduate experience are the Harvard Houses where the majority of students live amongst peers, graduate students, and faculty members. Described as “multigenerational communities,” the Houses “provide personal and enriching interactions that shape students both intellectually and socially, while providing a supportive and manageably-sized home inside a larger College and University” (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014b). Students are assigned to a House at the end of freshman year, and it is often the primary affiliation they use to identify themselves to other Harvard students.

Academically, Harvard promotes an undergraduate degree “designed with flexibility in mind,” where students can define their own academic goals. The university positions itself as a facilitator and support system to both help students achieve their goals while also “ensuring” students “receive a broad liberal arts education” (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014c). The history, merits, and critiques of Harvard’s approach undergraduate curriculum have been examined in various volumes (c.f. Keller & Keller, 2007; Lewis, 2006;). Most recent critiques center on the curriculum review initiated in 2002 by then President Larry Summers: emphasizing students’ freedom of choice, the new curriculum reduced the number of requirements and placed a premium on “internationalization” and “the scientific revolution” without any clear philosophical direction (Lewis, 2006, p.24). In other words, the report issued on the new curriculum did

not successfully address one of the original questions behind the review: “What will it mean to be an educated woman or man in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?” (p.23).

In order to meet the requirements of their degree, current students must complete 32 semester long half-courses distributed amongst concentration requirements, general education requirements including expository writing and foreign language, and electives. Overall, concentration requirements occupy approximately 40% of a student’s curricular program and general education requirements occupy about 30% of student’s curricular time. (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014d). Students choose from forty-eight possible concentrations and have the option to pursue secondary fields and foreign language citations, in addition to options such as study abroad, taking advanced level courses, and exploring alternative interests.

### **Recruiting Participants**

For this study, I interviewed 39 sophomores at Harvard College who, at the end of their freshman year, intended to concentrate in either economics or an arts-based field including visual and environmental studies (VES), music, and history of art and architecture (HAA). Given the disproportionate number of students considering economics versus any one of the arts-based disciplines, I included multiple arts-based fields in order have a sufficient pool of interview candidates from which to draw.

Furthermore, I looked for participants who, at the end of their freshman year, did not intend to pursue law or medicine. Excluding pre-law and pre-med students while including pre-business students was intentional. I made this decision for several reasons. First, business is not a profession in the sociological sense – business school is not a pre-requisite for going into business: there is no one prescribed pathway of education, licensing,

or agreed upon ethical code (Gardner, 2007).<sup>1</sup> It is also not a terminal degree. Business school is demonstrably different than law school or medical school since there is no one agreed upon body of knowledge and code of conduct that all students must learn. The domain of business, therefore, is much broader and less defined than the professional realms. Part of my goal was to understand how students who are interested in business conceive of the domain, and what pathways they believed would help them achieve their goals. Beyond these initial selection criteria, if any participant started to consider pre-med or pre-law during the period of our interviews, they were not excluded from the study. This initial constraint on participant selection was meant to exclude students who came to college with a pre-determined and certain focus on pre-professional training; students who developed this idea during the sophomore year remained in the study.

I was able to recruit participants based on intended field of study because all students complete the rising sophomore survey at the end of freshman year, where they indicate their top three concentration choices and pre-professional interests. With the cooperation of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies and Advising Programs Office, I emailed a recruitment letter (Appendix A) to all students who matched the aforementioned criteria. I selected twenty students with an interest in economics, and twenty with an interest in the arts and aimed for gender balance in my sample. While I started with 40 participants, one prospective arts student withdrew from the study after the first interview, leaving a total of 39 participants. Thirty-nine was an appropriate number of participants since I am not interested in generalizing; rather my goal was to discern patterns of meaning-making and identification that require an in-depth process of data collection and analysis over time.

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<sup>1</sup> “Profession has a clear connotation in our society. It refers to those spheres of work that feature a prescribed educational path and a license; only those people designated professionals in a particular field can call

### **Comparing students in economics and the arts**

A comparison between prospective students in economics and arts is interesting for several reasons. Since 2008, with approximately 1600 students per graduating class, economics has been the most selected concentration accounting for approximately 13-18% of the graduating class, and the arts are amongst the least selected, accounting for approximately 3% - 5% (VES: 1.5%-2.5%) (HAA 1%-1.5%) (MUS 0.4%-1%) (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2013). By looking at these two extremes and how students rationalize choosing the most versus least popular areas of study, we get a glimpse not only of their differences but also their commonalities as students in the shared educational context of Harvard.

Economics is the most popular concentration at the college (“What students study,” 2011) in line with a trend across liberal arts colleges experiencing surging enrolments in their economics departments (Colander, 2009). This trend has been explained in part by the association between economics and business. According to undergraduate dean Jay Harris, a recent survey conducted by the economics department at Harvard found that approximately 50% of concentrators would elect business if such a major existed (J. Harris, personal communication, September 4, 2012). While for undecided students, economics is known as a ‘default’ concentration, others suggest it is a popular choice because it is the “just right” liberal arts major that provides students with the “skill preparation, analytic rigor, and intellectual excitement that students look for in a major, and that employers look for when hiring students” (Colander, 2009, p.2).

By contrast, while the arts are theoretically important to a liberal arts curriculum, instrumental views of major choice as a determinant of employability discourage their pursuit. Arts-based fields are among the smallest at the college (“What students study,” 2011)



and are often viewed in the public mind as “a frill” rather than “part of the American educational enterprise... as an avenue for private enjoyment and development but not as useful as a public activity or an economical or political utility” (Kimweli & Richards, 1999, para. 2). In a recent article, English Professor Helen Vendler (2012) reflects on the admissions process and asks how Harvard might attract and “nurture the poets and painters of the future” (p. 27). She contends that if Harvard wants students inclined towards the arts to persist and *believe* that success can come from pursuing personal passion versus “a passion for a high salary,” the College must emphasize “inner happiness, reflectiveness, and creativity” (p.29) as worthy goals equal to the pursuit of leadership and financial success.

A comparison between how students navigate their decision-making toward these different fields in the context of receiving a “Harvard education” illuminates the values, beliefs, and assumptions that students employ to shape their academic experience. I chose Harvard as the context for this study, and its undergraduates pursuing these fields as participants because what happens at Harvard impacts practices in other educational settings (Keller & Keller, 2007). Furthermore, these students – due to their aptitude, resourcefulness, and networks – have the potential to excel, lead, and affect change *within* Harvard. Understanding the rationales behind their decision-making is important given their potential to shape the fields in which they are engaged. Furthermore, an exploration of how students factor their educational privilege into their decision-making will help answer the question “what is a Harvard education for?” from the perspective of those in the process of acquiring this coveted mark of distinction.

### **Participant overview**

The demographic composition of my interview sample is described in Tables 1 and

2. Whereas gender distribution was more balanced amongst the economics students (55% males to 45% females), the majority of arts students interviewed were female (74%).

Geographic distribution was relatively even amongst both groups, with the majority of students coming from the Northeast. The majority of students in both groups were white, but this was particularly true for the arts students where white students comprised 68% of the sample compared to 40% of the economics sample. Also notable was the lack of representation in the arts group amongst Black / African American and Hispanic / Latino students, though the majority of students who identify as “more than one race” were in this group. The range of socioeconomic status of each group was also similar (see Table 2), where the majority of students’ fathers have college or masters level degrees and working in some form of business. Both groups also had similar percentages of students on financial aid, 63% among the arts students and 70% among the economics students.

**Table 1. Participant demographics by intended concentration area N=39**

		Economics n=20		Arts n=19	
Gender	Female	9	45%	14	74%
	Male	11	55%	5	26%
Geographic Region	Northeast	7	35%	7	37%
	Midwest	3	15%	1	5%
	West	2	10%	2	11%
	Southwest	2	10%	1	5%
	Southeast	2	10%	3	16%
	International	4	20%	5	26%
Race	White	8	40%	13	68%
	Black /African American	3	15%		
	Asian	5	25%	2	11%
	Hispanic	3	15%		
	Middle Eastern /Arab		0%	1	5%
	White / African American	1	5%	1	5%
	White / Chinese	0	0%	1	5%
	White / Mexican	0	0%	1	5%
Legacy	No	16	80%	16	84%
	Yes	4	20%	3	16%

**Table 2. Participant socio-economic status indicators by intended concentration area  
N=39**

		Economics n=20		Arts n=19	
Father Education	High School	4	20%	3	16%
	College /Bachelors	6	30%	5	26%
	Masters / Terminal degree	8	40%	7	37%
	Unknown	2	10%	4	21%
Father Occupation	Architect			1	5%
	Arts			1	5%
	Business	8	40%	6	32%
	Education	1	5%	1	5%
	Engineer	3	15%	0	
	Health			0	
	Home-maker			1	5%
	Law			1	5%
	Service Industry	2	10%	3	16%
	Technology	2	10%	0	
	Unemployed			1	5%
	Unknown	4	20%	4	21%
Mother Education	High School	5	25%	2	11%
	College / Bachelors	8	40%	5	26%
	Masters / Terminal degree	6	30%	8	42%
	Unknown	1	5%	4	21%
Mother Occupation	Architect			1	5%
	Arts			1	5%
	Business	5	25%	1	5%
	Education	4	20%	1	5%
	Engineer	1	5%	0	
	Health	1	5%	6	
	Home-maker	3	15%	3	16%
	Law			0	
	Service Industry	4	20%	2	11%
	Technology			0	
	Unemployed				
	Unknown	2	10%	4	21%
Financial Aid	Yes	14	70%	12	63%
	No	5	25%	3	16%
	Unknown	1	5%	4	21%

Of the twenty students who intended to concentrate in economics at the time they were recruited to participate in this study, fifteen followed through and declared economics officially. Of the five participants who changed their minds, two declared applied math with a plan to pursue the economics track within applied math; one declared government as a placeholder while he continued to decide between economics and applied math (economics track); one decided to make economics a secondary while pursuing molecular and cellular biology as a primary focus; and one switched to psychology.

Table 3 presents an overview of participants by intended and declared concentration, and completion of the three-interview sequence. Of the nineteen students who intended to concentrate in the arts, six intended to pursue history of art and architecture, six intended to pursue music, and seven intended to pursue visual and environmental studies. Five out of six history of art and architecture followed through and declared this as their major; interestingly, three of them also declared a joint concentration in another closely related field. One student switched to psychology. Similarly, five out of six remained committed to music, with two declaring it as a joint concentration, and one switching out completely into history and literature. Four out of seven students remained committed to visual and environmental studies, one relegated it to a secondary field, and two switched out completely to social anthropology and economics.

## **II. Data Collection**

Data were from different sources: three interviews per participant, a writing exercise, and a demographic questionnaire. I used interviewing as the main strategy for capturing students' narratives about their decision-making and college experiences. As a part of the semi-structured interview protocol, I integrated a time-mapping diagram exercise and an

object-centered discussion in order to provide participants multiple entry points to formulate and express their views. Students completed a reflective writing exercise and a demographic questionnaire after their final interview (see Appendices A, B, and C for protocols).

**Table 3. Participants by intended vs. declared concentration, interview completion**

Participant*	Intended Concentration	Declared Concentration	T1	T2	T3
Courtney	Economics	Applied Math	•	•	x
Jonathan	Economics	Applied Math / Economics (2)	•	•	•
Mary	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Lily	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Wynn	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Annie	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Jackie	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Sara	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Michael	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Andrew	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Kevin	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Tyler	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Nathan	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Ryan	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Louis	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Justin	Economics	Economics	•	•	•
Redwood	Economics	Economics / ESPP (2)	•	•	•
Jake	Economics	Government	•	•	•
Lukas	Economics	MCB / Economics (2)	•	•	•
Beatrice	Economics	Psychology	•	•	•
Emma	HAA	HAA	•	•	•
Anna	HAA	HAA	•	•	•
Vivian	HAA	HAA + Archaeology	•	•	•
Westwood	HAA	HAA + English	•	•	•
Sarah	HAA	HAA + Music	•	•	•
Celia	HAA	Psychology	•	•	•
Kathe	Music	History and Literature	•	•	•
Reese	Music	Music	•	•	•
Richard	Music	Music	•	•	•
Ken	Music	Music	•	x	x
James	Music	Music + Neurobiology	•	x	x
Cameron	Music	Music + WGS	•	•	•
Jessika	VES	Economics	•	•	•
Jesse	VES	History of Science / VES (2)	•	•	•
Lisa	VES	Social Anthropology	•	•	x
Emily	VES	VES	•	•	•
Adele	VES	VES	•	•	•
Kayla	VES	VES	•	•	•
Angela	VES	VES	•	•	•

\* pseudonyms

+ denotes joint concentration

/ subject (2) denotes a secondary field

HAA: History of Art &amp; Architecture

VES: Visual and Environmental Studies

ESPP: Environmental Science &amp; Public Policy

MCB: Molecular and Cellular Biology

WGS: Studies of Women, Gender, &amp; Sexuality

## Interviews

In this research design, I applied an interpretive-constructionist approach to interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I was interested in how students interpret and construct meaning in the narratives they tell about their academic choices. I employed an in-depth, responsive interviewing model for data collection in order to access participants' interpretations of their experience while acknowledging my own role in guiding the conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews that allowed participants to respond to questions in a way that is most relevant to each individual (Seidman, 2006). I conducted the interviews in a private office at Currier House, one of the undergraduate residences. Students received Amazon gift cards after each interview (\$30, \$30, and \$40) as a token of appreciation for their participation.

Participants completed three interviews over the course of one academic year. The first interview (T1) was timed to take place at the start of the fall semester, before the official date students officially declare a concentration in mid-November. The second interview (T2) took place mid-year, shortly after winter break, and the final interview (T3) occurred at the end of the academic year. Interviews were designed to last approximately one hour, and they ranged in duration from approximately forty five to eighty minutes. The rationale for multiple interviews over time was to capture students' evolving understandings of their decisions before and after the decision-point, as well as to provide sufficient time to build a relationship of trust between myself and my participants (Luttrell, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Of the 39 participants, 35 completed all three interviews. All but one of the economics students completed the whole sequence of three interviews. Three out of nineteen arts students were unable to complete the entire sequence of interviews due to



unforeseen health issues. Of the four students who did not complete the sequence, two completed the first two interviews but could not complete the third because of unforeseen circumstances in health and scheduling. Two completed only the first interview and could not return for the second and third interviews also due to health and scheduling (see Table 3). None of them formally withdrew from the study, so their transcripts were included in the analysis. I completed a total of 111 interviews.

In each interview, I asked participants to construct (Seidman, 2006) their process around choosing a concentration. The first meeting took place as students were in the process of deciding on their concentrations with an approaching deadline. This interview (Appendix B) focused on the process of decision-making. Participants were prompted to think about and discuss specific autobiographical events, experiences, and people they view as having been crucial to their process, future career considerations, and perceptions of whether this was an easy or challenging experience for them. I also asked questions to gauge their perceptions of their fields of interest, as well as the role of academics in the context of their college experience at Harvard.

The second interview (Appendix C) took place mid-year, after students had a chance to situate themselves as concentrators in a particular department. This interview was an opportunity to ask students for their thoughts and reflections since their first interview. Additionally, each participant was instructed to bring one piece of work accomplished in a course of which they felt most proud. If the work sample from a course was unrelated to their concentration, I also asked them to bring an additional example from a course in their concentration. I did not analyze these examples independently; rather I used them to engage participants in an object-centered discussion (Tishman, 2008) to learn more about what excited them about their studies, what they had learned so far, and how they saw their work

as relevant to their learning. Finally, participants were given a time-mapping exercise, where I instructed them to draw a map of the different components of their life at college and indicate the amount of time spent on each component, as well as their relative importance. I left the room for approximately ten minutes while students worked on their diagrams and they notified me when they were finished. I then returned to the room and conducted the remainder of the interview using their diagrams as the discussion point. This exercise offered an opportunity for students verify for themselves whether or not they had been narrating an accurate picture. The concrete task of having to map out their time commitments and various components of their lives at college provided a helpful check and reference point for participants making sense of their experience.

Both the second and third interviews included follow-up questions discerned from preliminary analysis of each prior round of interviews. Multiple interviews allowed for an iterative process that allowed me to be responsive to participants and to the themes and ideas that emerged from each interview. The final interview (Appendix D) took place at the end of the academic year, before students left for the summer. This was an opportunity to talk with students about their reflections on their concentration decision, the year in general, and their first two years at college. It was also a good moment to talk with students about their hopes and goals for their remaining time at college, and their short and long-term future plans.

### **Writing Exercise**

At the end of their final interview, participants were given a writing exercise (Appendix E) that prompted them to think about their academic experience in relation to their broader life goals, whom they hope to become, and what they hope to achieve. Participants were given a quiet space with a laptop to complete this exercise. They were

asked to reflect on write about how they would like to be remembered as a person, a worker, and as a citizen (Duncan, 2013). Participants were prompted to consider their plans for achieving their legacies, actions they have already taken, and possible sources of support and challenge for reaching their goals.

### **Demographic Questionnaire**

Participants completed a short demographic questionnaire at the conclusion of their third interview (Appendix F). The questionnaire asked participants for background information including family information, racial and ethnic identification, socio-economic status via parental level of education and occupation, and whether they were on financial aid. Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to identify their own pseudonym for the purposes of the study.

### **III. Data Analysis**

I employed multiple strategies and an iterative approach to data analysis. I wrote detailed memos after each interview I conducted, summarizing the discussion, noting emergent themes and patterns, and comparing these with prior interviews to look for commonalities, differences, and potential topics for further investigation. I used primary analyses of each round of interviews to inform the next. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. I analyzed the transcripts in three phases. First, I grouped the transcripts by interview times T1, T2, and T3. I read through each set of interviews checking for accuracy and wrote memos keeping track of emerging themes and patterns (Charmaz, 2000). This approach ensured I attended to participants' subjective experiences in developing an analytical framework.

Second, I grouped the transcripts by participant, reading and coding each participant's set of transcripts using Dedoose. I paid particular attention to participants' use of language as a form of productive action, noting the way in which they construct meaning through talk and conversation (Willig, 2008). My analysis focused on their narratives as students in the social context of Harvard College. I used a list of codes developed emically from the first round of readings, in combination with etic codes (see Appendix G) from the literature and from the logic of my interview protocol. During this process, I produced analytic memos to keep track of possible recurrent themes as well as inconsistencies in the data.

Third, I created narrative profile sheets for each participant, tracking their trajectory through the academic year in relation to the most prevalent themes and tensions identified from the first two phases of analyses. I reviewed the coded transcripts once again, with an eye toward filling out these profile sheets in order to have a detailed picture of each participant in relation to these specific themes and tensions, which are discussed in the findings. I also specifically searched out discrepant data to ensure a balanced approach to my analysis, leaving open the possibility for alternative interpretations and emphasizing the complexity of students' experiences.

Throughout the analysis process, I met with an interpretive community of fellow graduate students who 1) helped to cross-check my codes by applying them to a sample of data and 2) provided feedback on my interpretations of the data.

#### **IV. Validity**

This study was designed to ensure that participants would have multiple opportunities and entry-points to formulate and express their views. I address validity by

using multiple sources of data (three interviews and legacy writing exercise from each participant) and triangulating patterns across these sources. Emic coding ensured that I attend to patterns that emerged from the data and etic coding provided checks and connections to theories in the literature.

I also address validity in terms of authenticity and reciprocity (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Luttrell, 2010). I aimed to conduct research that is authentic and reciprocal by 1) pursuing questions that arose from talking with people engaged in every-day action within my field of interest, in addition to questions that emerged from gaps in the literature; 2) producing research that invited feedback from participants so they might see themselves and their experiences represented in perhaps unexpected but resonant ways; 3) engaging in rigorous, evidence-based analysis that is as equally attentive to the counterpoints as well as consistencies I discovered in the data; and 4) being transparent about my researcher subjectivities in my research relationships, analysis, and presentation of my data so that readers might have a clear understanding of my perspective and an opportunity to critically explore alternative interpretations of the findings I present (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

## **Chapter 4. Academic Decision-making in Context: Transition and Definition in Sophomore Year**

In order to examine how students make academic decisions, it is necessary to understand the institutional context in which they are operating. At Harvard, students choose their concentrations in the middle of sophomore year. In this chapter, I will discuss how sophomore year is designed by the institution as a crucial period of transition and definition. First, I will describe how Harvard 1) structures the decision process of choosing a concentration and 2) supports students through this process through advising programs. Second, I will discuss the experiential arc of the decision-making process from students' perspectives. I will consider how they experienced this period of transition and definition as structured by the institution.

I found that the majority of participants in my study (72%) arrived at Harvard believing they already knew what they were going to concentrate in. As a result, they spent freshman year mainly concerned with fulfilling requirements. During sophomore year, most returned feeling confident and optimistic about the year ahead, primarily given their newfound familiarity with the policies and procedures at the University.

At the same time as students describe feeling more comfortable and familiar with Harvard, they also describe various ways in which they still feel fundamentally unsettled. I found that while students successfully transitioned into the procedural aspects of the College by learning the processes and policies of the system, transitioning intellectually and emotionally in relation to their concentration choice remained a challenge. Contrary to the expectation embedded in the structure of decision-making that students will move forward toward increasingly focused exploration and firm up their intellectual interests and academic identity, the students in my study describe feeling a *loss* of purpose around their studies

despite support provided by the College and consequently, a sense of alienation from the institution.

Furthermore, despite the prominence of advising as a main source of structured support, I found that only 50% of participants studying economics and 50% of participants studying the arts specifically mentioned their freshman and/or sophomore advisers as influential, and similarly, only 50% of each identified having a mentor currently in their lives. Almost all prospective arts students (89%) identified having role models currently in their lives, compared to only half (50%) of prospective economics students. In contrast, 70% of arts students and 90% of economics students reported having anti-mentors, the majority citing their peers at Harvard.

## **I. Institutional Structures and Supports**

Undergraduates at Harvard formally declare a concentration in late November of their sophomore year. Known as “Plan of Study” day, students select their concentration and map out the courses they will take to meet departmental and general requirements for their remaining five terms at Harvard. Concentration declaration is considered a milestone moment in the life of a Harvard undergraduate. Though the choice is not binding, changing concentrations can be challenging depending on how much or little overlap there is between a new concentration and a student’s existing course of study. Changing across academic divisions<sup>2</sup> is generally more difficult than changing within a division, since there is less overlap in requirements. Furthermore, time is limited. With few exceptions, students must complete their studies within a maximum of eight terms while they are in residence.

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<sup>2</sup> Four academic divisions at Harvard College: Arts and Humanities, Science, Social Science, School of Engineering and Applied Sciences

In order to maximize students' efforts towards making a well-considered decision, in 2007, the College extended the timeframe for concentration declaration from the end of freshman year to the middle of sophomore year. This structured more time for students to engage in a process of increasingly "focused academic exploration" with "a mind toward narrowing interests" before making a decision (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014e, p.6).

### **Freshman Year**

Perhaps the most active way in which the College supports students through this decision-making process is through advising. When students arrive as freshmen, they are introduced to an extensive network of advisers. Each student is matched with a freshman academic adviser, in addition to a proctor, peer advising fellow, and resident dean of freshmen, who "serve as the student's chief initial resources for academic and non-academic advice" (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014e, p.4). According to the Advising Programs Office: "The goals of first-year advising are to help students make the transition from high school to college, to help them navigate and shape their educational experience, and to encourage students to explore the opportunities and resources available at Harvard."

Students have a variety of options to consider when they construct their first fall and spring term schedules. In addition to taking a required course in expository writing based on their placement level, they determine when and how they will meet their foreign language requirement, which must be completed by sophomore year. In addition to taking department recommended courses as entry points into certain concentrations, the College also recommends that students take one General Education course per term toward the required



eight in each category of study.<sup>3</sup> Freshman seminars are yet another option for students who wish to participate in small class sizes and engage in close relationships with faculty. General Education courses and Freshman Seminars are also viewed as opportunities for students to explore different areas of study.

In a guidebook developed by the Advising Program Office introducing students to the forty-eight concentrations at Harvard, students are urged to approach their academics and concentration-choice with an open mind:

Consider possibilities that will allow you to cultivate your mind as well as encourage you to learn about fields you have not considered before...Do not be afraid to explore new academic fields. You never know the discoveries you might make and the unexpected paths you might take. Remember, you came to Harvard to follow your intellectual passions and find your intellectual home. Doing so should be a great adventure, but it will also take some effort on your part (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2012, p.4).

As a measure to ensure that students engage in some form of exploration, students are “required to have a documented Advising Conversation with a representative from one or more prospective concentrations near the end of the second term of enrollment” (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014f, p.29). Students self-report these conversations via an online portal that future advisers can view for background information. One way in which students can fulfill this requirement is to participate in Advising Fortnight, which takes place over two weeks near the end of freshman year. The event begins with a “comprehensive academic fair” where representatives from all forty-plus concentrations are present to share information with students (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014e, p.6). Throughout the two weeks, departments hold open houses, events and panels providing students with guidance on subject specific as well as general topics such as

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<sup>3</sup> The eight categories of General Education include: Aesthetic and Interpretive Understanding; Culture and Belief; Empirical and Mathematical Reasoning; Ethical Reasoning; Science of Living Systems; Science of the Physical Universe; Societies of the World; and United States in the World.

“Considering interdisciplinary concentrations,” exploring joint concentrations, and conversations with alumni. Advising Fortnight is meant to prepare students for their return as sophomores, when they will have one more term to explore potential areas of interest before ultimately declaring how they will focus the rest of their academic study at Harvard.

### **Sophomore Year**

Sophomore year in general is structured as a milestone year in the life of a Harvard undergraduate. Centered on this major academic decision of finding an “academic home,” it is also the year in which students move from Harvard Yard, where all freshmen live during their first year, to an upperclassman house for their remaining time at Harvard. Given the unique, immersive residential component of undergraduate education at Harvard, it is impossible to discuss academics in isolation from the residential experience. The House System is one of the defining elements of undergraduate life and house affiliation is the primary way in which students identify themselves within the College community. By creating a timeline in which these two major milestones are scheduled to take place during sophomore year, the College signals to students that they are transitioning into a period of academic and social commitment and definition.

When students return as sophomores, they are introduced to a new network of advisers layered upon their freshman network. As members of a specific house, they now have access to the house-based advising team that includes a combination of faculty and graduate students who serve as housemasters, resident deans, and resident tutors. Resident tutors are matched with incoming sophomores each year and serve as sophomore advisers. Their role, as described by the Advising Programs Office is to help students “choose classes, select a concentration, think about study abroad and fellowships, and make summer plans”

(The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014e p.9). This work begins the moment students move into the houses and prepare for the first week of classes.

As talk of summer adventures subsides, the conversation soon shifts toward academics as students strategize for how they will use “shopping week.” Otherwise known as the first week of classes, “shopping” is the process by which students can sample the various courses they may be interested in taking. They have the opportunity to drop in and visit any class in order to get a sense of the instructor’s teaching style and expectations, feel the rhythm of a class and see if they can imagine being engaged throughout the term, and familiarize themselves with the course load and flow of deadlines relative to the other classes they are considering. This time period is particularly crucial for sophomores as the courses they build their schedule around can impact their decision-making about a concentration come end of November.

During their first advising conversation with their sophomore advisers, which occur before the first week of classes, students are expected to share their plan for shopping, as well as their thoughts about possible concentrations. Advisers help students think through their planning. For example, they guide students who feel indecisive or without direction toward courses that might draw on their interests and strengths. They encourage those who are extremely focused and narrow to examine whether there are any possible alternatives left unexplored. Additionally, students and advisers might consult the *Q Guide*, a collection of student course evaluations compiled by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Harvard College Institutional Research Office. The guide includes ratings for difficulty, workload, as well as instructor evaluations.

Soon after these first advising conversations and the frenzy of shopping week, the term proceeds in full swing. Students have several opportunities to re-consider their course

selection. They have up to four weeks to decide to add or drop a course, and six weeks to withdraw from a course that may not be going as well as anticipated. Approximately ten weeks into the term, students must submit their declaration of concentration as well as a plan of study. The declaration formally places them within a department at Harvard, and the plan of study is a worksheet students must complete showing a tentative schedule for the remaining two and a half years at Harvard. This process is also supposed to be helpful to students because it forces them to look at the requirements in each area they are interested in, and to find a schedule of courses they can imagine themselves taking to fulfill these requirements. Oftentimes, whether or not these future courses appeal to students can help them decide whether a concentration is suited to them or not. Once students declare, they are assigned academic advisers within their department and are ushered into yet another community and network of resources.

The institutional structures and supports offered by the College – in the form of timeframes, deadlines, and advising – are meant to create the conditions necessary for students to engage in “focused academic exploration” that will lead them to “successful transitions into their Houses and their chosen concentrations” (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014e, p.8). According to advising materials provided to students, the central feature of a successful academic transition is following one’s “intellectual passions” and finding an “intellectual home” amongst the departments at Harvard. However, meeting these substantive goals varies from student to student, as do the ways in which each student makes use of the structures and supports in place to guide them through this process.

Having offered a general overview of the institutional arrangements in place that structures and supports the decision-making process for students, I will now turn to students’ narratives of transition and definition related to this process of choosing.

## II. Students' Narratives of Transition and Definition

### Freshman Year: Focusing on Requirements

*"Academically, freshman year was - it was kind of exploratory. But at the same time, there are so many requirements you have to fill that you don't really need to think that hard about which classes to take...I took Ec10 and that fills a general education requirement and a concentration requirement if I choose to go that direction, which I have. Math - pretty much anything I was taking, except for the freshman seminar, would knock something off the list I needed to get done..."*

*You're encouraged to explore your interests but- it's counter to what Harvard wants the academic experience to be - but sometimes when exploring your interests is counter-productive to your other goals like getting a job or getting a good GPA, it puts you in a tough situation...and as much as I would like to say I take all my classes according to how I want to expand my knowledge, it's impractical to say that."*

– Nathan

Like many of his peers Nathan arrived at Harvard believing he already knew what he wanted to study. Rather than thinking of concentration choice as a chance to pursue an intellectual interest, many students take a more "pragmatic" approach, choosing subjects they view as leading to careers they can picture themselves pursuing, and courses in which they think they have a better chance at doing well. Of the thirty-nine participants in my study, twenty-eight (or 72%) claimed they arrived at Harvard believing they already knew what they wanted to study. This was true for an equal number of students in each group of prospective economics and arts students (see Table 4)<sup>4</sup>. Of the twenty-eight, twenty-two followed through on their initial goals and pursued subjects in the academic divisions they originally imagined they would pursue. Six decided on a significant change in direction, switching from one academic division to another between arriving at Harvard and the start of their second year (see Table 5).

The students I interviewed, who arrived believing they already knew what they would

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<sup>4</sup> A student indicates their prospective status on a questionnaire they filled in at the end of freshman year, so it does not necessarily correspond with what they believed they would be studying when they arrived at Harvard.

concentrate in, spent their first college year taking the foundational courses for their prospective concentrations, in addition to other requirements such as expository writing and courses in general education. In addition to these requirements, prospective economics concentrators tended to round out their schedules with math and statistics courses, which also count as economics requirements. Prospective arts students also tended to round out their schedules with math or science courses. They gave various reasons for doing this, including keeping up the skills many of them had honed in high school, as well as wanting to ensure they were not overlooking potential areas of study.

For example, Sarah, a prospective arts concentrator explains, “I know I don’t want to be a mathematician or go into that field. So I thought, let me take that as soon as possible, just in case by some miracle I love it and want to study it.” Additionally, some viewed courses such as economics and computer science as offering basic skills that they wanted in their repertoire, and therefore chose to take these introductory level courses – which also helped them meet general education requirements – to complete their schedules.

**Table 4. Did you arrive at Harvard believing you already knew what you would study? N=39**

	Yes	No
Prospective Arts Concentrators	14	5
Prospective Economics Concentrators	14	6

**Table 5. Participants who changed Academic Divisions between Freshman and Sophomore Year N=6**

Intended Division	Chosen Division			
	Science	Social Science	Art	Engineering
Science	x			
Science	x			
Science			x	
Science			x	
Social Science			x	
Art		x		

### Sophomore Year: Focusing on Policies and Procedures

*"I didn't know how I'd feel about being a sophomore, and then I came back, and right from the first day, I knew where to get what. I just knew how to navigate my way around and that made me feel so good and I thought, "Wait, actually, sophomore year is not so bad after all." You kind of know your way around right from the start. You can actually go to the academic portal and start choosing your classes, which you could not do as a freshman because you would have no idea where to start."*

- Mary

In the course of my interviews, participants describe entering sophomore year feeling more confident and “settled” at Harvard. The narrative arc in Mary’s experience reflects the general experience of the students I interviewed. They express entering this period of definition feeling wiser about how to navigate the policies, procedures, and resources on campus. They have learned how shopping week works, how to use the online student portal to generate their study cards, how to search the Q guide for course suggestions, and how to factor in teaching style, workload, and level of difficulty to create a balanced course schedule. They learned which advisers they need to go to for signatures to get their study card approved, and the deadlines for completing these tasks.

Students describe knowing better how to take full advantage of shopping period as sophomores in comparison to the year before. As one student explains, “I think my freshman year, I kind of just took that for granted, and didn't think the professor would be too important if I was in a lecture class anyway.” She had planned her course schedule ahead of time and attended shopping week as if it was just a regular first week of classes. When, in the middle of term, she found herself unmotivated and unable to get out of bed to go to certain classes because she was not engaged by the professor, she thought “if it's my freshman year and I don't want to go to class, I can't imagine it getting any better.” This student realized that “teachers can make a difference in terms of the subjects that you like and you dislike, because even if you love the material, if it's not taught so well to you, I feel that you lose interest in it.” One of the many advantages of “shopping week” is the

opportunity to experience a professor's teaching style, in addition to learning more about course content, to ensure a good pedagogical match.

With a better understanding of the system, some students describe ways in which they tried to ensure a more balanced workload for themselves when planning their course schedules. For example, they learned to combine classes with varied assignment types, balancing problem set courses with essay-focused courses; they considered timing of due dates for assignments and exams for each course, aiming to avoid overlaps; and they took into consideration the schedule of their other commitments including sports and student organizations in which many assumed leadership roles.

Like many of the students I interviewed, Mary, a prospective economics concentrator, was apprehensive of the transition from freshman to sophomore year. Whereas students perceive freshman year as a time to get their bearings and adjust to College life, they view sophomore year as a time to get serious and make decisions they believe will impact the rest of their lives. This perception is bolstered by the institutional arrangements of the College that also feature sophomore year as a period of definition as students are assigned to a House and formally declare their concentrations.

Mary worries as she anticipates the significant decisions ahead of her this year and how quickly graduation will be at her doorstep: "sophomore year... It just makes you get closer to the reality that you're going to graduate." This sense of impending "reality" and being thrust back "into the world again" fuels a kind of urgency amongst students to "start thinking about practical goals." For many students, this means thinking "practically" as Nathan suggests above, focusing on courses and areas of study that will help them achieve important goals such as "getting a job or getting a good GPA." Kevin describes coming to a stark realization:



Rather than trying to have a great college life, have a lot of friends here, make great memories, pursue what I love, I'm starting to think more like, okay, what do I need to do and how do I figure out whether I want to go to grad school? Or, I want to get a job - how do I get there? And what steps do I need to take at Harvard to get there?

What struck me about students' narratives of freshman year in comparison to sophomore year is this abrupt shift in talking about the first year as a period of adjustment, to the second year as a time to "get closer to the reality" and to start thinking more "practically" about how to prepare for life beyond college. There is a jump from one to the other, and, as in Kevin's case, some students are quick to set aside the goal of pursuing a "great college life" including pursuing what they love, to a means end approach with a focus on the future. I noticed, however, that at the same time participants described feeling more "settled" at Harvard in general, they also described various ways in which they still feel fundamentally unsettled. I found that while students successfully transitioned into the procedural aspects of the College by learning the policies and procedures of the system, and socially by joining a House community, transitioning intellectually and emotionally remained a challenge.

### *Losing Momentum & A Sense of Purpose*

*You know, in high school you want to get into a good college, want to get good grades; but at the moment that's just somewhat... I don't know. I don't really care about grades as much as I did. I'm going to be fine after I'm out in the field...I think I'll have a job...but I don't know, there's just nothing that's really driving me at the moment, nothing. No program that I really want...I really don't have any huge academic or life goals that I'm shooting for right now. On the contrary, I'm thinking of taking a semester off maybe at some point just because I think the sophomore slump is very real, for me at least...I just don't have any real goals anymore.*

- Lukas

Despite the institutional buildup around students' progression toward concentration choice and finding an intellectual home, students themselves describe feeling a loss of momentum and sense of purpose after the initial enthusiasm of starting a new school year. Referring to a "sophomore slump", participants report a series of related challenges

including adjusting their approach to learning, managing workload with demanding co-curricular commitments, and questioning their sense of purpose and belonging at Harvard. At the center of this “slump” is a process of loss and re-definition of goals characterized by an experience of conflicting / competing interests for students’ time.

### *Adjusting Approaches to Learning*

Managing academic workload and maintaining high grades are two main challenges that participants’ identified during this period of transition and definition. The difficulty has to do, in part, with adjusting to new pedagogies of teaching and learning distinct from what students were accustomed to in high school. One student describes having to become “more open-minded” and aware of “the broader picture” as he realized part of the pedagogy of his courses was learning how to “apply certain skills sets to different situations.” He contrasts this with his approach in high school, which he describes as very “one-dimensional” and “closed-minded”. He has realized that here, you cannot “do well in most classes if you just try to memorize stuff.” He also believes he is being challenged to acquire a more robust conceptual understanding of course content, which he sees as “a way more valuable way to learn... because if you just memorize stuff, you don't remember it, which is why I don't really remember anything about US history, even though I did well in it in high school.” This student’s narrative helps us understand how high achievement in high school based on a pedagogical model of rote memorization does not necessarily translate smoothly into the elite college context:

I never knew that that was the way that you needed to approach these things, you know? Because when things come very easily to you in high school, it's like you don't really have to worry about adjusting and taking that into consideration." But now it's like, "Okay, what do you want to get out of this class?"

For students pursuing studies outside of the academic divisions they honed during high school, the process of re-defining expectations for teaching and learning is even more drastic. Emily came to Harvard originally thinking she would pursue the sciences but since changed her mind and has decided to concentrate in Visual and Environmental Studies (VES) in the division of Arts and Humanities. Cautious about what felt like a risky decision, she decided to continue taking courses in micro and cellular biology (MCB), just in case she regrets her decision. Balancing the demands of these courses and her prior expectations with new priorities has been a challenge. Emily describes having to learn how to prioritize her many demands:

In freshman year, I was actually considering MCB as a concentration...and it wasn't until this year that I've completely decided that's not for me and I wanted to do VES just solely. But I still have the mentality of trying to throw all my energy into my science classes. So I spend the whole day working on science and then I'm rushing the last hour before my drawing class and I'm trying to get drawings done, and I'm like, "Why is this?" If this is my concentration, I should be devoting the majority of my energy towards this 'cause I want to gain as much from it as possible.

Re-adjusting her views on different methods of evaluation and how she allocates her time has been difficult. She describes the inevitability of spending the bulk of her efforts on her science course, which is more regimented and structured in terms of lab time and homework assignments. In contrast, how much time she spends in studio outside of class time for her drawing course is entirely up to her. She describes how the assignments are focused on process, in comparison to problem sets, which require the right answers. Therefore, according to Emily, since she is still very "achievement-oriented", it can often feel more urgent to prioritize her science class over her art class, even though science is no longer her primary focus:

In art or the VES field, you're graded on whether you've shown effort. Say, for my drawing class, if I can't draw and I do a bad drawing, at least if it shows I worked hard and tried, I'll get a good final grade. While in my science class, if you're not good in science, you don't get rewarded for trying, you get rewarded for results. And

so I feel the pressure to make sure the science is perfect and well done. So I devote as much time as required for that, while art it's like I can maybe skate by with a little less, as long as it showed I worked hard.

In her effort to pursue her interest in the visual arts while also maintaining a safety net by keeping one foot in the sciences, Emily says one of her main challenges is that she no longer has much time: “Before, I'd have free time to do just personal relaxing things, but now it's constant work and I'm always behind, which is typical in college.” Falling behind and running out of time were repetitive refrains amongst participants as they struggled to balance the demands of their academic schedules with personal health and wellbeing and even more prominently, with their co-curricular commitments.

### *Managing Academic Workload and Co-Curricular Involvement*

In addition figuring out how to prioritize various courses in relation to one another, students must also determine what co-curricular activities they want to devote time to. They describe wanting to be “a little less wide-spread, more concentrated on things” that interest them, often with increasing levels of responsibility in leadership roles. The motivations behind their choices vary, from pure enjoyment, to gaining work-related skills, networking, and resume-building. It can be difficult to turn down opportunities that make them feel recognized and valued.

Jackie, a prospective economics concentrator, describes how swiftly these opportunities can pile up: “all of a sudden, things got out of control because I went from having no leadership positions to having four. And I just took a new one. So now it's five.” She describes with pride her role as a “corporate associate” of a popular public health event on campus. She is responsible for recruiting corporate donations to fund the event, and feels this is important experience given her interest in working in the finance industry in the

future. Yet, her participation in this and four other campus organizations takes time away from her studies, and she is not performing as well as she would like:

I didn't realized until mid-October that I was taking way too much time on extra-curriculars, which for me, is a little bit easier, since extra-curriculars are a lot easier to focus on. You can see the tangible...the fruit of your labor. Basically, you see everything that you're doing come to fruition. Whereas academics, not so much. I mean, you're working, you're studying, but test scores aren't exactly reflective of how much you worked for it. I've just gotten my Econometrics test back and it's not stellar, even though I worked really hard on it.

Jackie describes the fast pace at which the term unfolds and the constant stress of falling behind: "I was just relishing the fact that I was done with midterms and all of a sudden, they're back. So it's something that never ends. If you are always catching up, you can never feel at ease. I'm always stressed." Like many students, Jackie strives to keep up with her academics, but she admits that often it is easier and also feels more urgent to focus more on her co-curricular activities.

Similarly, Reese, a prospective arts concentrator and talented musician describes "getting further and further away from focusing on academics." Unsure of what she wants to concentrate in given her many interests, she explains feeling unnecessarily limited by course requirements and ultimately, by having to make a decision about a concentration. For these reasons, she has focused most of her time and energy on her co-curricular activities, which include performing with several musical groups on campus. She is even contemplating taking a year off because she doesn't want to be "locked into this method of school." She refers to the model of progression where "you have to do X and Y to get to the next point instead of just doing the next point, even though you're qualified."

Reese describes feeling "more responsible" to her co-curricular commitments in comparison to her academics where she believes no one would notice if she does "crummy work...because there's forty people in the class and nobody really cares." Though she

acknowledges that she could spend more time investing in her classes and getting to know her professors for a more engaging experience, she describes lacking the motivation to do so. However, she is hesitant to actually take a year off because she worries that if she leaves, she might get so “wrapped up in real life” she might not come back: “taking a year off would be interesting. I just don't know if it's a good idea 'cause I don't know if I'd come back. And I want get my Harvard degree, obviously so.” Getting the degree is important to Reese because gaining admission to an elite college is something she has been working on “since fifth grade.” If she does not finish, she explains, “it would be like all of high school would have been a waste...because you don't work that hard and kill yourself in high school to drop out.”

### *Lacking Goals and a Sense of Purpose*

Perhaps one of the most poignant explanations that students offer for feeling a lack of engagement in their academics is that they are unsure of what they are working towards. Whereas their goals were crystal clear in high school – “get into a good college...get good grades” – students now find themselves in uncharted territory. For some students, this is the first time they are making independent decisions and defining a set of goals for the near and long-term future that have not been pre-determined for them. They are suddenly jolted from a more regimented pathway with clear goals into a world of uncertainty and options. This is true even for the students I interviewed who came to Harvard and started sophomore year with clear and unwavering short and long-term goals. For these students, questioning and doubting what they were formerly so certain about is especially challenging.

In our first interview at the beginning of the year, Lukas provides an enthusiastic and detailed explanation of his plan to explore economics and micro and cellular biology as

possible concentrations. His academic choices are structured around his future career goals: “What I really probably want to do after I finish all of my education is work in the pharmaceutical business. I was hoping to sort of manage research and development - that's like my dream job. So combining the Life Sciences and Economics seems like a natural choice for that direction.”

Lukas came to Harvard quite certain that he would pursue economics, but upon discussing his plan with department advisers in MCB and OEB, he re-considered his options. He was advised “to stick with MCB for now” since he could always learn more about business later in business school, which is also one of his goals. He realized that “you can never replace an undergraduate degree in the Sciences, just because it's so much time commitment and so much work. You can never really catch up on your Science undergraduate career.” This rationale made sense to Lukas, who also did not want to close the door to possibly pursuing a graduate degree in the life sciences. He rationalized that a more in-depth knowledge of the sciences would help him achieve his dream job in the pharmaceutical business and ultimately decided to concentrate in MCB with a secondary in Economics.

In his subsequent interviews, however, the issue of sophomore slump emerges as he begins to question his life goals in general. He explains, “sophomore slump is real...I have very little aspirations about what to do in the future, which is somewhat worrisome.” Compared to his earlier interview, his enthusiasm is replaced with worry over such uncertainty. He describes how gaining admission to college has always been his main goal up until this point in his life, and the lack of purpose he is experiencing now that the next goal in his life is no longer obvious: “You know, in high school you want to get into a good college, want to get good grades; but at the moment that's just somewhat... I don't know. I

don't really care about grades as much as I did...I really don't have any huge academic or life goals that I'm shooting for right now.” It is unclear to him what ought to guide his decisions in selecting courses. Whereas before “it had always been very clear” because he was “fulfilling requirements to some degree,” the greater freedom of choice he has now causes him to question the rationale behind his decisions.

A heavy workload coupled with losing a sense of purpose led several participants to fundamentally question their belonging at Harvard. As prospective economics and arts students, participants in my study discuss how they chose to attend Harvard over colleges that specifically offer undergraduate degrees in business, fine art, and film – areas of study they believe they would have pursued if offered at Harvard. As Jackie struggles academically in her economics courses, she often revisits the fact that she chose Harvard over the University of Pennsylvania, where she was also accepted to the Wharton School of Business: “I realized that I'm more into Business and Finance than actual economics, which is why I want a Business or Finance major, which is also why U Penn would be awesome.”

Similarly, prospective arts students wonder how their trajectory would be different had they attended places such as Berklee School of Music, The New England Conservatory, or Rhode Island School of Design. Kayla, who has decided to pursue studies and a career in film-making, is seriously considering whether or not she should transfer to New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. She laments Harvard's lack of technical training and focus on documentary film over fiction film: “I felt like if I'm going go into the arts and the creative side, it's not really a guaranteed career path. The least I could do is be versed about the history, be versed about the technicalities of the job, and then the technological aspects of it all.” She spoke with advisers throughout the university about her fear that she will not be prepared when she graduates to compete with others who have received more targeted



training: “I feel like I can graduate with a Harvard University degree, but if I don't have the skill set to back it up, that is almost more damaging...I came back this year determined to make my decision of transferring or staying and making it work, and making sure I exhausted all my resources.”

### *Lacking Advisers, Role Models, and Mentors*

*So, the Harvard advising system, while very thorough, I'm not sure that it's really given me that much. ... I didn't really come out with any advice that was very profound, that changed my decision*

- Justin

Given the prominence of advising in how the College structures and supports students in this period of definition toward choosing a concentration, I examined the extent to which students referenced advisers in their descriptions of how they made their decisions. I also asked students explicitly about role models, mentors, and anti-mentors in their lives who influence their decisions. Approximately equal numbers of prospective arts and prospective economics students (50% in each group) specifically mentioned their freshman and/or sophomore advisers as influential in helping them define their academic goals and trajectories. In contrast, almost all prospective arts students (89%) identified having role models currently in their lives, compared to only half (50%) of prospective economics students. Approximately half (50%) of the students in each group reported having a mentor, and 70% of arts students and 90% of economics students reported having anti-mentors.

### *Advisers*

Students were fifty-fifty about whether or not they found their freshman and/or sophomore advisers helpful. Whereas advisers played a pivotal role for some students, others claim a “lack of good advising” as a “big issue” at Harvard. A match in academic and

professional interests was a key factor for whether or not students believed they benefited from their advising relationship. Not only could someone with a similar trajectory offer advice and guidance for how to select courses and think about possible career trajectories, students also viewed their advice as more legitimate because of the shared interest and respect they accorded these individuals.

Adele is an example of a student whose freshman adviser had a pivotal role in encouraging her to concentrate in Visual and Environmental Studies. Adele arrived at Harvard with plans to be pre-med. Although she knew that this did not preclude her from studying something other than science, she assumed she would “probably just do a science because it's easier, because then half of your requirements will already be taken care of.”

Though Adele also had aspirations to pursue the visual arts and had even contemplated applying to art school, she decided against it because she was afraid it was not a practical choice. In addition to all of her requirements, Adele allowed herself to take an arts-based freshman seminar as an elective during her first year at Harvard. When she had to start thinking about choosing a concentration, she describes feeling “really lost.” When Adele explained to her freshman adviser, who was also a pre-med adviser, that she enjoyed her freshman seminar the most out of all of her classes. Upon hearing this, he encouraged her not to discount VES. This was a huge shift in perspective for Adele, as she explains:

I remember I had to meet with my freshman advisor about the courses I was picking for second semester...and he just sprung it upon me, he's like, "So, what are you going to concentrate in?" And I told him, "I'm very, very lost. I don't know." And that's when he started pushing me, like, "What do you like, and what class do you love the most?" And I told him, "I really loved the freshman seminar." And then he's like, "Then why haven't you told me that? Why didn't you say you want to do VES?" I was confused. I was like, "I thought that wouldn't make sense to do for the pre-med. I thought you'd laugh at me." He's like, "No, I always am looking for someone to do something different. I'm sick of having all these kids coming in and doing bio and chem...Do something that interests you. If that's what you love, you should do it." So... then I was really excited. I didn't realize that it would both fit, so I went

home and immediately started writing down all of the courses to see if it would fit, and it just barely does.

When students find the right match in an adviser and participate proactively with them in an advising relationship as Adele did, they can discover an important source of guidance. Taking the initiative was difficult for some students: indeed, they describe a much less structured experience with advising in comparison to their freshman year, when weekly check-ins were built in to their schedules. Even though the same if not more resources are available to them, students must exercise greater independence in accessing these resources to develop meaningful relationships and networks of support.

Not all students had positive experiences to report. At least half the students in my study feel there is a lack of effective advising leading up to concentration declaration, despite the formal relationships that have been set up to guide them through their first two years. Students cited being paired with advisers outside of their fields of interest as one source of mismatch. Though coordinators often attempt to match students with advisers who share their same academic and professional interest, this is not always possible given the numbers.

More telling are the students who realize - upon reflection- that they were not challenged by their advisers to consider alternatives to their plans. For example, Jessika arrived at Harvard convinced she would concentrate in VES but later realized that her true interest and skills were in economics. She made a drastic change in direction largely on her own and wishes her adviser could have played a greater role in helping her think through her motivations:

Okay, so this is actually a pretty big issue. I just haven't found any good advising here at Harvard. Harvard offers so many wonderful things, but academic advising, I don't know. I think it's because I came in so certain here. I was like, I told my advisor, "I'm VES all the way. Don't even worry about it." I'd planned out the next four years here, of my plan of study. They're like, "Okay, go. You're good to go." I never really had anyone question me besides my family, but I was so used to my family

questioning me that I was just like, "Shush." I wish that an advisor picked my brain a little more.

Jessika's experience raises an important point that may be particular to advising high achieving students about decision-making in a context such as Harvard. When a student such as Jessika describes plans with confidence, she is less likely going to be questioned since it is easy to assume that a high level of preparation indicates a student has thought through the rationale behind his or her goals. Yet, some students in my study suggest they would have been open to having their views challenged more, and may have even made different decisions had this been the case. During our interview, Louis, an economics concentrator, realized he would have likely explored more if his adviser had encouraged him to do so:

When I went to meet with my adviser, I kind of said, "Okay. Here is what I want to do." And he didn't really make any other suggestions outside of that. He was like, "Just make sure you get your Gen Eds." And he suggested Gen Eds I should take...I'm like, "Okay, I think I want to concentrate in Economics." He didn't say, "Okay, explore other fields first."

Louis explained that most of the courses in General Education he took in freshman year were "classic economics" courses – in other words, courses that count for both General Education requirements and concentration requirements. He describes, "I'd fulfilled the Math requirement with Math 1b and then I fulfilled US in the World with Ec 10." He believes he would have explored more had he been encouraged to do so, and would have taken courses in other areas of interest, including History and Spanish.

### *Role Models*

Interestingly, almost all prospective arts students (89%) identified having role models currently in their lives, compared to only half (50%) of prospective economics students. Amongst both groups, students referred to family members, professionals / public figures in

the field, and professors. A notable difference between the two groups is that more arts students (eight out of nineteen)) identified professionals and/or public figures in their fields as role models, in comparison to the prospective economics students (three out of twenty). They referenced renowned artists, architects, filmmakers, and musicians as role models whose work inspires them. For example, Angela explains her admiration for the work of architect I.M. Pei: “I actually had an opportunity to go to China this summer, and I went to Suzhou near Shanghai and they have Suzhou Museum, which was designed IM Pei, and I was very impressed by how clean the lines were...the interesting choice of material...how spatially, it connected with the audience.” She describes being drawn to the “clean lines and determination” of his work, and being motivated by seeing someone in her field of interest who is “able to be so successful at what [he is] good at.”

In comparison, economics students referenced individuals they had worked with as interns in a work context, including a bank CEO and a professional colleague. The former was admired for his transformative restructuring of the banking system in her country of origin, the latter for her career trajectory and determination: “She went to Pace and did business, and went there [to her current bank of employment], and she's been working her way up. She used to work at New York Plaza, now she works for the Midtown new office. And so, I looked up to her, at least, in terms of how she's moving up. And she works really hard, she barely sleeps. But she likes her job. She's good at it.”

A small portion of students (four in each group), identified professors as role models. Students admire professors who are passionate about their field of study and are strong teachers who can pass on their enthusiasm to students. Speaking of one of her economics professors, Wynn describes:

He's very intense and you can tell he clearly loves Economics, and he clearly loves teaching the subject. When somebody is so obviously passionate about something,

you get interested in it too. You're like, "Oh, that's really worth studying!" So I think he inspires you to want to learn the subject better, which is really good as a teacher actually.

Similarly, Vivian attributes her enthusiasm for art history to her professor, whose knowledge and lively teaching style keeps her engaged and motivated. Several economics students mention the renowned professor who teaches the foundational economics course. Noting that he receives mixed reviews as a professor, these individuals made an extra effort to meet him during office hours and think of him as a role model because of how open he is about his political views." According to Mike, "everyone always hates on [this professor] because he's conservative, but I happen to be conservative, so I kind of like that he's at Harvard being conservative and everyone's hating on him and he doesn't care...he just keeps doing his thing and ignores it." Similarly, Justin explains that the professor's "political views are more in line" with his than "many professors in the department." Furthermore, Justin admires him because "he is just a really bright guy, like just talking with him, he is able to explain things really clearly." Except for the few students who are considering pursuing PhDs in their field, the extent to which students see their professors as role models is limiting: "I don't really want to be a professor, so they can only be a role model to a certain extent, because I don't ultimately want to do what they're doing."

### *Mentors*

Students had a more difficult time identifying mentors, with less than 50% of students in each group saying they currently had one in their lives. Of note, no student identified a professor as a mentor. Instead, they viewed family members, high school teachers, academic tutors, and Harvard peers as mentors. According to students, mentors are different from role models, and most aspired to have one in the near future. Whereas role

models can be distant figures who students may not know personally, students think of a mentor as “someone who has gone through the same thing,” who can give advice on “what’s to come and how to handle it...like concentration prospects, job prospects, life prospects.” Some students specify that a mentor is someone who will be around for a long time. Kayla explains: “I don’t think a mentor should be someone who comes into your life and leaves quickly.” Instead, it should be someone who is part of a student’s life for long enough that they get to “the point where they know me a lot and they can give me a lot on a long-term basis.”

Trust is also a central element in a mentoring relationship that students aspire to, where a mentor is “someone you would feel like you’re not afraid to open up about most things, and if you do, you feel like they wouldn’t judge you and they’d be able to provide really good advice with your best interests in mind.” Furthermore, respect is also key, as students want to be able to “look up to” someone for advice *and* as a model for how to stay on track, particularly while in College. Therefore, according to students, a mentor is “someone who has high ideals,” and as one student explains, is

Someone who wants to achieve great things, because I feel like it’s very easy to lose sight of that. I feel like college years, everyone wants to make a difference in the world, but I think people sort of become pessimistic over time, even during their college years about what kind of impact they can make in the world. So if I’m going to look for one quality in a mentor, that’s definitely someone who still holds himself or herself to that high ideal, and can push me to do that as well. Someone who’s very open...I can talk to him or her about anything, and someone who is very mature and someone who is very clear in their decisions.

Most students aspire to developing a long-term mentoring relationship with someone they respect and look up to, who has pursued a similar pathway, who is willing to give advice and challenge students’ views and decisions. They describe a person with whom they would feel open to talking freely with and who can help them find focus. One student explained she is looking for someone who can “help me find something, specifically, to focus on” within her

area of study so that she can “really bring something new to the table.”

### *Anti-Mentors*

For the lack of mentors in students’ lives, they have no shortage of “anti-mentors”- those who “teach us by bad example” (McFarland, 2007, para. 1). Thirty-one out of thirty-nine participants, or 80%, identified individuals whom they view as the opposite of mentors – individuals who are the antithesis of how they would like to conduct themselves and who they aspire to be. Interestingly, these students cite their Harvard peers most frequently as anti-mentors, with twenty out of thirty one students, or 65%, indicating a fellow student from their academic or social groups on campus.

Students describe a variety of reasons for why they view particular peers as anti-mentors. Their critiques center on observations of undesirable personal, social, and academic conduct. In particular, they draw boundaries between themselves and peers who do not prioritize their academic life responsibly, who have a sense of entitlement and ruthless attitude towards success, and who are overly influenced by peer pressure. Participants in my study value staying organized and ahead of their academic work, even if they are not always successful at doing so themselves, and think of this work as their priority. Observing the irresponsible behavior of his roommate, Richard describes what he finds problematic:

I don't really know what he does. He sleeps a lot during the day. He drinks a lot on the weekends. He's a great guy but sometimes I see patterns of his behavior and I'm like, "Those are the things that I want to avoid doing." I do not want to skip that much class and end up at UHS [University Health Services].

Similarly, Lily describes an occurrence when she and a friend had a final paper due in a few days, and he chose to go out instead of work on the paper: “he didn't start until Wednesday and it was due Thursday at noon. So, he didn't sleep at all that night and he also



had a Spanish final that afternoon on Thursday, so he was like falling asleep during his Spanish finals. He turned in his paper right before the deadline.” Students take issue with “this level of procrastination” thought they are also familiar with the struggle of keeping on top of their own work.

At times, one person’s procrastination can become another person’s problem when one decides to “go out drinking on a weekday instead of finishing a problem set, and then rely on somebody else to give them answers.” Participants react strongly against peers who do not take responsibility for their own work and who take advantage of others in order to catch up. One student explains explicitly that an anti-mentor is “someone who is manipulative...someone who takes advantage of others...someone who would do anything to get what they want and achieve success. I do have a guy friend that I don't really like a lot...he's famous for manipulating other people to serve his own interest.”

Lamenting those who do not make the most of their academic experience, students named seniors they know who by the end of their time at Harvard, seem to have more of a transactional learning experience rather than one that is transformational: “By the time they're seniors, their concentration is something they only knew academically, basically through Harvard and through grades. Their knowledge is limited to just what they have read.” This student describes wanting a learning experience that inspires her to pursue her interests and passions beyond her textbooks, and the opportunity to synthesize learning in different contexts.

The pressure to overcommit oneself as a signal of achievement and competitive advantage, also come into play in students’ conceptions of peers as anti-mentors. These students “seem stressed all the time about how much work they have and it seems they spend more time complaining about how much work they have than actually working on it,

and then it piles on them.” One student describes the challenge of being surrounded by this kind of frenzied attitude and the challenge of not succumbing to the same mentality: “It's not a positive force to be around either, for example, eating dinner with them and they're freaking out about everything,” listing off all the things they have to get done.

At the same time that it can be a challenge to maintain a sense of personal, academic, and social balance, those who appear successful at “doing it all” are viewed with suspicion and at times, with envy. Jon feels both irritated and insecure in comparison to a peer he describes as someone who always “puts a lot on his plate” and “keeps himself busy” but “somehow always crams everything at the last minute.” Jon ponders how, despite this student’s “arrogance,” lack of attention to his coursework, and frequent drinking, things always seem to “work out for him.” Overcommitted to activities and struggling with academics himself, Jon laments, “maybe I'm not smart enough to do what he is doing, like do so many classes and do other things and just cram and get away with it.” When I ask him what he believes this peer is “getting away with,” he replies “doing well in classes without trying much.” Jon implies there is something unscrupulous about the way in which his peer is able to perform well academically with little planning or effort.

The “arrogance” and ease with which some peers approach their work and social interactions were common points of disapproval amongst participants. For example, Andrew describes the sense of entitlement he observes in one of his peers: “there's just this crazy kid who has tons of money from his dad I assume. He is offensive to everybody... is totally un-empathetic and not the kind of kid you want to be much like.” Similarly, another student describes how he “disagrees” with the way two of his roommates “are going about their college experiences.” He explains,

It's not that they are not focused enough on school, because they do focus on school. But I see the way they've carried themselves...just being a little bit too

cool...It's a bad idea to think that you are better than other people and that you can get away with things that are either immoral or illegal.

He speaks of the role of peer influence, observing that when they “start hanging around a group of people who make [the immoral or illegal] seem ok to them, then they will start doing it.” Students also resist being susceptible to peer pressure to take on areas of study and future careers based on the hope of “huge financial pay-offs down the road.” As one student explains, “I want to be interested in what I'm doing and not because I'm getting paid to be interested in what I'm doing. I want to actually care about what I'm doing.”

## Summary

In this chapter, I have described the ways in which the institution structures and supports the process of academic decision-making through the first two years of college and presented findings to illuminate how students themselves experience these structures and supports. I have demonstrated that whereas the institution assumes the decision-making process is one of exploring, identifying, and narrowing interests, most of the participants in my study arrived at Harvard believing they already knew what they were going to concentrate in, and therefore focused mainly on fulfilling requirements in their first year.

Furthermore, I found that students sense of belonging at Harvard during sophomore year as a period of transition and definition is rooted more in familiarity with policies and procedures rather than in finding an “academic home” intellectually. Contrary to the expectation embedded in the structure of decision-making as moving students toward increasingly focused exploration and firming up students’ intellectual interests and identity, the students in my study describe feeling a *loss* of purpose around their studies despite support provided by the College and consequently, a sense of alienation from the institution.

Furthermore, they have few mentors and role models, and see their peers as main examples of anti-mentors.

With the structural and cultural context established, I now move to examine students' narratives of decision-making as individuals negotiating the structural and cultural context at Harvard.

## Chapter 5. “What Harvard Students Do”: Economics and the Path of Least Resistance

*“Economics lends itself to a certain path: whether it’s finance or consulting, it’s that business sort of path.”*

- Nathan

In the previous chapter, I discussed the institutional arrangements and practices around students’ process of choosing a concentration, and students’ perspectives on the experiential arc leading up to the decision. I examined the extent to which their experiences correspond to institutional structures and supports, and considered the factors that impact how students navigate their academic decision-making in the context of their first two years at Harvard.

In the following chapters, I discuss the logic behind students’ academic decisions. I found that a central part of participants’ decision-making is contending with notions of achievement that are associated with their group identity as “Harvard students.” Furthermore, these notions of achievement are grounded in an economic rationale, which occupies a rule-like status amongst participants given its pervasiveness and centrality as a common reference point.

First – I examine the shared conception of “what Harvard students do” in relation to decisions about which area of study to pursue that emerged from students’ narratives. “What Harvard students do” can be understood as a group identity that is generated from an “internal-external dialectic” of self-definition by group members and definition by others (Jenkins, 2008, p.42). Though students may *individually* vary on the extent to which they identify with this conception, the fact that they recognize and describe it as a common reference point indicates its pervasiveness as a label associated with them as “Harvard students.” As social identity theorists note, “the individual and the collective are routinely

entangled with each other” (Jenkins, 2008, p.38). Individuals make sense of their identity in relation to the collective, and “consciously pursue goals and interests” in order “to ‘be’- and to be ‘seen to be’- ‘something’ or ‘somebody,’ to successfully assume particular identities” (p.38). Choosing a concentration, therefore, is an act of identification. In order to understand the factors that shape students’ decision-making, it is important to understand how they identify with this shared group identity that comes with a set of expectations about what they ought to do as Harvard students.

Once I have established that this shared conception of “what Harvard students do” exists amongst participants, I examine *how* it impacts their decision-making process in choosing a concentration. In this chapter, I show that students who chose to concentrate in economics describe it as an easy decision given how closely it matches the expectations associated with their group identity. Despite their ease, however, many of these students are also concerned about articulating the ways in which they are *different* from the norm. In contrast, I will show in the following chapter that students who chose to concentrate in the arts describe it as a more challenging decision, given that they are straying from the set of expectations associated with their broader group identity as Harvard students. The extent to which these expectations factor in to students doubts and uncertainties about their choice to pursue the arts is further evidence of the pervasiveness of this shared narrative.

## **I. “What Harvard Students Do”: A Shared Concept of Achievement**

*I'm pretty set in doing Finance, and like everybody then... I would do Economics*

- Jackie

*Since I don't really know what I want to do, it seems like since everyone else is trying to go into finance, so that's what I should be doing too.*

- Lily

*You really need to have the confidence to major in something that's sort of, you know, maybe not as popular at Harvard as like Economics or Neurobiology or something. You definitely need a lot of confidence in order to do that.*

- Cameron

Throughout my interviews with participants, it became apparent that they held a shared concept of achievement they believe is associated with their group identity as Harvard students. Both economics and arts students described in detail a notion of “what Harvard students do,” as a key reference point they had to negotiate when making their own decisions about what academic path to pursue. This reference point also has a critical role in shaping how students think about the connection between their academic path and future career prospects.

I am interested in examining the prevalence of this economically-driven logic of action amongst those who do and do not self-identify with this notion of “what Harvard students do.” The logic is not only perpetuated and reinforced by members of the in-group, but also external forces such as the dominant cultural narrative centered on the economic purpose of higher education, corporate interests, societal and family pressure, and so on, which makes it so compelling for all students to consider.

What exactly do “Harvard students do?” Kevin, an economics student, explains the trajectory that students are aware of, regardless of their area of study:

Well, there is a very strong stereotype here for Economics concentrators... [They are] the finance people or the people who, I guess, are looking to earn a lot of money after they graduate. Because they don't have a business degree here, I know a lot of people who want to go into business will concentrate in Economics. And I think that's sort of the stereotype that has stuck with us and I think it's partly very true... I think a lot of people concentrating in Economics aren't really passionate about the field itself as an academic field...

I think because there are so many people who are looking to get a job in finance, who are looking to get a job in the business world, some people are simply just swept away, because I was one too last year. I saw that a lot of people were comp-ing<sup>5</sup> these

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<sup>5</sup> Comp: to try out for something, derived from *competition*

finance groups. A lot of people were interested in internships in the finance industry. And I thought to myself "Oh, this must be what Harvard students do. This must be what I should do too," because you just feel safe going with the general public, right? And I think because of the social pressure, some people lose, sort of lose, the point of their years here, the purpose of their education. And they stop questioning why they're here...

Kevin illuminates the general logic behind why many students choose to study economics. He describes the common perception that economics is the closest thing that Harvard offers to a business degree, and the belief that it is a clear path to high-paying work opportunities in business and the finance industry. Furthermore, he describes being “swept up” by this logic and the frenzy of pursuing the steps necessary to progress on this trajectory, such as joining relevant student groups and applying for internships with companies that often serve as the entry point for students who are then hired by those same companies when they graduate. Indeed, the “social pressure” is keen amongst students whose drive and sense of competition may be more developed than an awareness of what they might find meaningful in their studies and their work.

It is well known amongst students that economics is the most popular concentration at Harvard, and this fact appears to generate a range of reactions and contradictions amongst participants. Jackie, an economics concentrator herself, captures this conundrum in her description: “If you get an Economics degree from Harvard, that's pretty impressive...I mean, you're just like the rest, I guess. This is one of the biggest [concentrations], along with Government or something. You're just like a staple.” Jackie describes studying economics as both impressive and ordinary at the same time, reflecting the mixed feelings that many students have toward why it is such a popular concentration choice and the motivations behind students’ selections.



Some students view the popularity of economics as a testament to its renown as an area of study at Harvard, and its usefulness in terms of laying the foundations for future work opportunities. For these same reasons, others see it as a default concentration for those who have no clue what they want to study, or those who are simply looking for what is perceived as the most direct route into high-paying careers in finance and consulting. Mike, an economics student, describes how economics is the “big catch-all” of concentrations: “it’s kids who want to go to Wall Street, it’s kids who want to get their PhDs in Economics, it’s jocks who want to find an easy way out, but it’s also very smart kids who want to use multi variable calculus in their Economics.” In addition to these, Mike asserts his belief that “the Wall Street example” is the most stereotypical – those students who study economics with the rationale of “I just want make a lot of money quickly when I graduate.” He counts himself as one of these students, and explains he “would love to work on Wall Street” and his understanding of what it means to go into business is “to make a lot of money fast.”

Other economics students are more cautious about aligning themselves with this reputation. Though they may share similar goals, they are more careful about how they frame their motivations and also emphasize their actual interest in the subject matter to justify their decision and distinguish themselves from their peers. Nathan, for example, is hyper-aware of how others might perceive him and his choice to study economics. A varsity athlete from California, Nathan almost didn’t make it for our interview because he had advanced in the process of “punching” final clubs, the elite male social clubs in the vicinity of Harvard’s campus. As someone who identifies as Hispanic/Latino with Mexican roots, he acknowledges that to the rest of the world, he presents as white. He is particularly aware of the ways in which, at first glance, his profile matches that of a stereotypical person of

privilege in this context – as an athlete, eventual member of a final club, and economics concentrator - even though his autobiography is much more complex.

Cognizant of the assumptions and judgments people might place on his decision to study economics, he describes his reluctance to tell people about his academic plans throughout freshman year: “I never really admitted to anyone that I thought I was going to do econ, but I think even by the end of my first semester, it was pretty well decided.” He kept the decision to himself for as long as possible because he did not want people to think he was getting swept into the fold along with his peers. He explains,

I was really wary of it too because you tell people you are doing econ, and they say, ‘well you know that’s not a business major. It’s econ. It doesn’t transfer. If you want to go into finance you can do anything, it doesn’t have to be econ.’ For me, I was very careful to make sure it wasn’t about that because I don’t want to a) sell out or b) feel like I went into something I don’t really enjoy because I thought that’s what I was supposed to do.

Nathan’s narrative points to the shared concept amongst his peers of one of the main reasons students typically pursue economics. He resists being grouped into this collective notion of economics students specifically, and Harvard students in general, by keeping his decision to himself until he felt sure about his motivations. For Nathan, “selling out” means “following the rat race” and getting involved with something “solely because it pays well.” Relatedly, this includes coming to Harvard for the brand-name, even if it is not the best match personally, socially, or academically for a student.

In an attempt to distinguish himself from his peers, Nathan describes his genuine interest in studying economics and his decision to pursue it despite having arrived at college with “a real open mind” about what he might study. In order to distinguish himself from the logic behind “what Harvard students do,” he emphasizes his uniqueness by the fact that he actually enjoyed taking Ec 10ab, the introductory course to basic economic principles and methods: “I loved Ec 10, and I don’t really know anyone else who can say that. Everyone

complains about that class but I really enjoyed it.” At the same time, he acknowledges the context of Harvard as influential in his decision:

I think if I had gone to a school where engineering was more prominent, like Stanford or one of the UCs I probably would have studied engineering. But coming here with the way the economics program is so prominent and seeing how great of an experience I had in Ec 10 with all the guest lectures and Greg Mankiw- it just, it was kind of a natural choice.

Given his sense of engagement with the material and what he describes as “Harvard’s tremendous reputation in econ,” Nathan believes that economics was the right choice for him.

Like the majority of economics concentrators I interviewed, Nathan is studying economics because he is interested in going into business. Specifically, he is interested in investment banking, sales and trading, or consulting. He admits he would like to explore finance as a possible career track. With an older sibling who also pursued this route, albeit during the financial crisis, and other peers as examples, Nathan is well aware of the perils associated with this direction in terms of work-life balance. He watched a friend take on an investment banking job who “would sleep in his office for 2 days in a row” because of the amount of work he had to get done. Nathan observes, “I know that brings in a lot of money, but it’s not something I’m interested in because its pretty obvious to see that you’re not as happy when you’re tired.” He considers the fact that many of his peers tell him that most people “only stay in it for two years,” and he wonders whether or not that is something he is willing to do, even for a short period of time

Nathan thoughtfully examines his motivations behind his interest in economics and business, and how they might be related to his conceptions of success. He contemplates, “I think I have a hard time reconciling current happiness with future happiness – or I’m sorry – success. When I think of future success I just want to be happy. That’s it. And money

doesn't make me happy. But there are a lot of things that I like to do that require some money, but not a lot." He explains one of the reasons he would like to take a job in finance is to make enough money in order to pursue his passion for the outdoors and traveling, which can be costly activities. He reasons, "these are certain things that you need like a particular type of job for...you can either live on the edge, paycheck to paycheck and have more uncertainty. Or you can work a little harder at first I think, and watch that help you in the future."

The notion of front-loading hard work and in some cases, hardship – whether in the form of pursuing an area of study or work that is difficult, overly demanding, or disengaging – as an investment in future financial gain and/or lifestyle was a common rationale among the economics concentrators I interviewed. Nathan reasons that he is investing in his future happiness by using this strategy, and believes he is likely being misjudged as a stereotypical economics concentrator and Harvard student who is pursuing this path purely for financial gain:

I think some people see the jobs I'm looking at and they think that I'm confusing money with success, with happiness. But the reality of it is that it's more of a means to an end. And I try very hard not to be confused about that because when I have people telling me 'Oh, you need to do everything you can to leverage this job into an I-banking job – that is something that I'd really like to do, but I try to keep perspective.

Nathan wrestles with differentiating himself from the stereotype, and tries to distinguish between securing a high-paying job for pure financial gain versus as a means to securing a comfortable lifestyle. Like others, he rationalizes his path as a means to an end, where he imagines he will have the financial freedom to pursue his passions, which for him include being an avid outdoorsman and fly-fisherman. He is uncertain, however, about just how much he needs to achieve in order to attain this goal, and the social stigma against

taking a perceived “easy way out” if he does not accept the most lucrative and demanding job that he is offered. Nathan explains:

I do worry about...what's going to maximize my happiness in the future. It could be that it turns out that I only ever get offers from one group or one company and that I always end up just following this one path that sort of lays itself in front of me. Or I could end up where I could either go into i-banking or sales and trading or consulting path. And those are the kind of decisions that I fear because it's very easy to make the decision to go where the money is. I think counter to what a lot of people probably believe, it's harder for me to make the decision to *not* do that. I think a lot of people would consider going into the job with less hours and less pay to be the easy way out almost, but I view that as a harder decision to make because I think that there is a societal stigma against that and it's a risk...I fear making the decision to have more leisure and to take it and then to realize it was the wrong decision. But you know, I guess I'm influenced by – you hear people always saying “I didn't take enough time to do the things that I love” and I have hobbies of being in the outdoors and everything that really mean a lot to me and so it's a balancing act to figure out what that best decision is.

Nathan's general concern about the perception of others is not inconsequential since collective / group identity is produced through a “dialectic of internal and external definition” by in-group and out-group members (Lamont and Molnár, 2002, p.170). Not only is this common perception of “what Harvard students do” (concentrate in economics in order to pursue a lucrative job in business and finance) shared by members internal to the group, it is also a salient feature of outsiders' definitions of Harvard students. Nathan describes how his close friend since childhood, who decided to pursue engineering at Stanford, is “really critical” about his decision to attend Harvard. Since physics and engineering were also of interest to Nathan, this friend watched as he put those aside to attend Harvard and study economics: “She went to Stanford I went to Harvard. She's doing engineering at Stanford. And so she always tells me that I'm selling out.”

Not all people would view Nathan's approach so critically however. To others, this path is precisely the opportunity that is earned by gaining acceptance to Harvard. Angela, who chose to concentrate in Visual and Environmental Studies, describes her parents'

impression that she would be better off studying Economics. Angela explains her parents' perspective:

Their explanation was, "I don't think it's the best way to take advantage of Harvard because the most renowned thing about Harvard is Economics or Government, something like that." And they thought that would be the best way to take advantage of the fact that I went to Harvard, which is totally understandable... They knew what path that would take me after graduation.

The path Angela is referring to is the same one that Nathan describes: the belief that studying economics will lead to high paying jobs in business and finance.

Out of respect for her parents, and also because she did not want to inadvertently miss out on an opportunity, Angela agreed to try some economics courses and consider pursuing it as a secondary field. She also sought advice from other VES students and alum to learn about possible career options associated with her studies. She discovered that even VES concentrators can go on and work in consulting and immediately shared this information with her parents to reassure them she will have future work opportunities. All the while, Angela is gradually becoming more confident about her decision to pursue VES. Even though she has always known that she is deeply engaged by the visual arts and wanted to immerse herself in this direction, she hesitated at first about whether it was the best use of her time at Harvard. She explains, "I got into Harvard. They're an academic, like liberal arts school, but art is definitely not a typical major for a lot of students here, so I wasn't really sure." Angela was not sure whether studying an arts-related subject would be considered "academic enough" in a place like Harvard. Accordingly, she had also considered Math or Linguistics as possible concentrations, in addition to economics - areas she considered to be more seriously "academic" than VES. For now, however, she is committed to her decision to study VES.

The tension that Angela describes between pressure to study something perceived to have more academic weight while also practical in terms of employability is closely tied to the shared concept of achievement. This concept of achievement is defined by certain skills and accomplishments that students attribute greater legitimacy to over others. To compensate for her unorthodox decision, Angela talks about a more tempered approach to a future career. She is not interested in being an “artist-artist” because she believes it is too much of a risk, and instead sees herself pursuing “more of a corporate career.” She is considering advertising as a possible avenue that she believes is a happy medium between a well-paved path and her creative interests:

I think advertising is somewhere in between Economics, like finance...to something that requires a creative field. So, I think it's a good combination of that, a good balance between that. I've never really thought about being... just like an artist before. So, I don't think it strays way too far from what I thought I was going to do.

Angela’s narrative provides further evidence that the concept of “what Harvard students do” is one that is shared amongst students regardless of areas of study. It is something that each student must contend with, whether they are economics students who must investigate their motivations in relation to this logic or arts students who face the challenge of justifying their decision to take an alternate path. As Angela’s experience suggests, the arts students in my study are keenly aware of how their decision is an unconventional one in the context of Harvard. As they describe, “everyone thinks [economics] is the most stable concentration”, and it is an appealing area of study given the future work opportunities, salaries, and promise of a comfortable lifestyle associated with that path. As we heard Kevin describe earlier, in some ways, it is also the path of least resistance – the safe thing to do by going along with what most people are doing, with predecessors who have paved the way. By choosing a lesser-known path, there is an element of giving up the opportunity of a well-structured avenue for success.

As the arts students in this study demonstrate, their decision to pursue the arts is in constant comparison with a more conventional or widely accepted approach to making use of a Harvard education. They face the challenge to “resist the larger impulse” that “most people have” to choose from the biggest concentrations, of which Economics is the biggest. Instead, they must contend with their own values and assumptions as well as those of the people around them. Adele, a VES student, examines her preconceptions about how best to take advantage of a Harvard education:

When you think Harvard, you don't think art, you think, I don't know, you think economics or you think the sciences, math, computer science. And Harvard – art - I don't know, it just seemed like... To get this chance at this great education but then to take courses in painting and drawing, it didn't [seem right].

Adele's explanation is an example of the ways in which these shared ideas of what is considered a legitimate area of study shapes how students weigh their decisions. Even when they are certain of their interests, it is easy to feel undermined or de-railed from their choices when a logic that privileges a certain pathway is so pervasive.

This logic, rooted in an economic rationale that defines certain areas of study and skills sets as more practical or useful than others, is perpetuated by peers and adults alike, within Harvard and beyond. Westwood, who is studying the History of Art and Architecture, illuminates the tremendous amount of pressure she receives from people – including relatives and family friends whom she interacts with frequently - who often express their “concern” for her and her decision to study Art History:

The argument that I hear again and again is that Art History is not going get me a job after college, that it's already a really tight job market, and that I'm really only hurting myself by majoring in something that's so, "unpractical" or "inapplicable"... I rarely actually engage that, so I don't actually ask this back, but I don't know exactly what would be terribly practical, especially at a liberal arts school. I mean if you're going to go somewhere and train, like really train in Computer Science or do something- Engineering, Computer Science - those I understand. But usually, they aren't making that argument, because that argument is fine - those are real skills and like, skill-based jobs. But people who are arguing that Gov or Ec is so much more practical than Art



History or English, I just don't know that I buy that, because goodness knows that all of those concentrations are graduating dozens of people into the consulting industry. And I think we're coming from many different places when we're having this conversation, because their fundamental assumption is *that's* where I want to end up: on Wall Street or in the consulting industry or something like that. And that's not where I want to end up. I don't think I'd be happy on Wall Street.

Westwood's narrative particularly reflects the pervasiveness of the economic logic in the context of Harvard and beyond. As an individual, she is clear about her academic interests and goals; she even has the full support of her parents. Yet, she also provides one of the most thorough accounts of having her decision being undermined on a regular basis by people who surround her and care about her.

These students' stories exemplify the issues and negotiations students have to contend with internally - individually and with one another - as well as externally with influential people in their lives. The shared concept of "what Harvard students do" is comprised of two separate but often interrelated beliefs. First, that securing a lucrative job in business, finance, or consulting ("going to Wall Street") is a measure of ultimate achievement and thus avenue to success, indicating you have put your Harvard education to good use. And second, that studying economics is a stable and preferred path to getting this type of job because it is a concentration that is practical, reputable, and related to business. Though it is not the only pathway to this kind of future opportunity, it is viewed as the most accessible. In this next section, I will examine how students come to these beliefs and the impact of these beliefs on students' concentration choice.

## **II. Economics: A Natural Choice**

Now that I have established that this shared conception of "what Harvard students do" exists amongst participants, I will examine *how* it impacts their decision-making process in choosing a concentration. As we have seen, students view this decision as more than just

an academic one: they are choosing whether or not to subscribe to a shared definition of achievement and relatedly, the underlying conceptions of prestige and legitimacy associated with certain fields of study over others. Further evidence of the persistent notion of “what Harvard students do” and the economic rationale associated with this identity can be seen in the explanations participants offered as to why choosing a concentration was an easy or challenging experience. Not surprisingly, the majority of economics students (seventeen out of twenty-one) claimed that choosing a concentration was an easy decision, in comparison to the majority of arts students (seventeen out of nineteen), who claimed it was challenging.

Participants provided several explanations for why choosing economics was an easy decision. They believe economics is a practical and versatile concentration that will prepare them with skills for “the real world.” In particular, they believe that economics provides a direct connection to their future goal of working in business, that this pathway will lead them to financial security, and that securing a job in finance or consulting is a prestigious accomplishment that continues to secure their elite status. In order to stay on track, I found that participants purposefully limited the amount of academic exploration they would do during their first two years at college. They imposed these limits on themselves so they would not get distracted by other interests or they claimed to have few other interests or abilities, and therefore choose economics as a default and practical choice. I will now discuss the logic behind each of these explanations.

### **“Real-world” skills, application, and versatility**

The economics students I interviewed had firm ideas about the ways in which economics was applicable to the real world and therefore their future employability. They describe the ways in which their studies have helped them better understand current events

in the news with a particular focus on government economic policies. Andrew, who is taking an economics seminar on poverty and inequality in the United States explains, “two years ago I wouldn't have understood anything that's going on in the newspaper...and I had never known the difference between a stock and a bond...and the difference between wealth and income, which is really interesting.” Students also believe they are acquiring the quantitative skills that will contribute to their ability to understand the basis for different approaches to economic policy. One student explains, “I think it's kind of like a real-world application of Math that's not super Math, I guess. And just kind of how the world works and how it should work.”

A standing belief amongst these students is that areas of study involving quantitative skills are objectively more difficult, and that employers, particularly those in the business, finance, and consulting industry, would prefer someone who could demonstrate these skills. In fact, many of these students talk about economics as a happy medium since they do not feel their quantitative ability is high enough to be competitive in fields such as physics or engineering. One student expresses his belief that engineering is “the pinnacle of a degree” because it is “the practical use of Science and Math put together.” Failing that, economics is “a decent balance of something that's a social science and is somewhat quantitative, and definitely seems like it's geared towards finance because you're looking about money theory.”

Given that economics still involves the use of quantitative skills in the context of real world application, students suggest this is one way of signaling to employers that you have “sufficiently invested in yourself” and in your education, rather than taking an “easier” (non-quantitative) route through college. Mike, who has a more extreme opinion on the value of math over what he believes are the more “watered-down” nature of the humanities explains, on a “scale of practical to irrelevant, I want do something closer to the practical side.”

Indeed, a working theory amongst many economics students is that being economics concentrators gives them a clear advantage for applying to jobs in business and finance: “I know that if I wanted to have a banking job or an investment job, or something like that, it would definitely give me a leg up if I do Economics and know basically the theory behind it.” They don’t really believe in the idea that “you can concentrate in anything and still get a job,” as is often the suggestion given to students who struggle over their decision.

In addition to thinking of economics as a happy medium, students also value the “versatility” embedded in their area of study. Since they believe economics provides them with a unquestionably valuable skill set, they feel a sense of security in their choice: “choosing Economics is great, I think, because it's so broad and you can do so many things with it, but at the same time... I don't think it's something that would limit me to doing other things.” This is particularly true for the few students I interviewed who discovered a real sense of engagement in learning about economics. They also happen to include the few who are not explicitly set on the idea of getting a job in consulting or finance. Though they are not closed off to the idea, they have broader goals in mind: “If you concentrate in Economics, you can pretty much do anything. You can go to law school, you can go to med school, and you can get a job doing banking or consulting, or also go to grad school. So because I didn't have to worry about that career choice, I think it's been easy for me to decide, and just the fact that I did really like Economics.” These students have the best of both worlds: they are pursuing an academic path that they enjoy, while also benefiting from a sense of security regarding the future.

Most students I interviewed, however, describe setting aside their immediate happiness and engagement while they figure out exactly what it means to study economics. As many begin to realize that their experiences in their courses do not match their pre-

conceptions of what studying economics involves, they describe feeling uncertain and disengaged. For some, economics is much less related to business than they expected. Whereas they anticipated learning more professional skills such as accounting, the content they are receiving is more theoretical in nature. Some admit that their economics courses are their least favorite, citing other courses as being the most engaging. Yet, they remain firm about economics because they believe “the material in Econ is more useful,” “more real,” and just a “sensible concentration.” In addition to the uncertainty and disengagement they feel about the content, they also report poorer levels of academic performance than they had expected. Students talk about having “trouble absorbing the material,” realizing that economics is “not something that comes intuitively or naturally” to them.

### **“The closest thing to business”**

Two thirds of the prospective economics students I interviewed said that they want to study economics because they are interested in going in to business after they graduate. The common belief that economics is “the closest thing” to business – which participants narrowly define as finance, consulting, and “a career on Wall Street” – is something that all my interviewees had to grapple with, regardless of whether or not they aimed for these career trajectories. Conceptually, some participants believe that if you study money, you will make money. Others believe that studying economics is an important “signal” to future employers about the skill set they possess and the seriousness of their intentions to pursue a career track in business and finance.

Participants’ initial impressions about the ways in which economics is connected to business are based on a loose understanding of economics as the study of markets and money. They believe that studying economics will give them “a leg up” on securing a

business-related job after they graduate. Five students expressed an interest in eventually pursuing an MBA, and another five students said they would have chosen to concentrate in Finance or Business if these were options at Harvard. The undergraduate program at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania was a popular point of comparison for students who ultimately decided to attend Harvard due to its general reputation. Yet, once they arrived, they faced the challenge of constructing an academic program to meet their interest in business, and they gravitate toward economics. Cecilia admits that if it were an option, she “would have done business” because she has a clear passion for it and she feels she “would actually enjoy those classes.” She explains, “I think it would have made the decision a lot more clear because I would have been like, ‘I’m concentrating in business.’ There’s no question.”

In order to compensate for Harvard’s lack of an undergraduate concentration in business, students actively seek to supplement their formal curriculum with an informal business component through membership and participation in related student groups. These organizations play a key role in introducing students to the various realms of work that have become notorious with “what Harvard students do,” specifically investment banking, sales and trading, and consulting. Students quickly learn about terminology, opportunities, and sequence of steps involved in paving the way toward future jobs in these areas from their peers in groups such as Harvard Financial Analysts Club, Veritas Financial Group, and Harvard College Consulting Group.

Participants identified such co-curricular activities as the main avenue for learning more about business. Wynn explains how she joined the business board of a student publication, as well as Harvard Women in Business, because these organizations “would actually teach me something about the corporate world.” In fact, participants consider

participation in such organizations as a crucial component of their education. According to students, the knowledge, skills, and networks gained from membership make up for Harvard's lack of a business and finance track. This co-curricular component is therefore perceived as an additional "requirement" and fundamental source of information, for both determined and uncertain students alike.

Ryan, who arrived at Harvard with no knowledge of these career tracks, has devoted much of his time to learning about how to pursue working in finance through these channels. He describes originally thinking he would study biology and pursue a career in medicine, but changing his mind in the summer before college started. Though he cannot pinpoint a decisive moment for the switch, he recounts considering the extended amount of schooling that would be required to pursue medicine, and the fact that he is "fairly personable" and enjoys interacting with other people. Ryan began to think that business and finance might be a good option for him because he perceived it as "having a lot more interpersonal interaction" which was something that he found "very attractive." As he began to think of this switch, he describes trying to learn more about his options in medicine compared to his options in business and finance once he arrived on campus as a freshman:

I was trying to rationalize my switch to myself...I tried to learn a little bit about both careers in freshman year and the summary that I heard, basically, was: if you're planning on being a doctor, prepare to spend eight years in med school after your undergraduate thing here... then like be in crushing amounts of debt, but then eventually make enough money to pay it off and potentially have this career you enjoy.

In contrast, Ryan describes learning about economics as a path toward investment banking:

...the enticing part about, like the most enticing part honestly, about investment banking was, "If you want to make a \$120,000 a year...your first year out of college, come to Investment Banking." I was like, "Whoa, that's a lot of money." And maybe that's the thing that tends to be, I think, the pull for investment banking... You can't talk about it in an interview, but at the same time, that's why 90% of people are in the field.

This comparison, in addition to the amount of time Ryan had already invested in taking the introductory economics courses, solidified his decision to pursue economics over biology. Strikingly, he remains committed to this decision despite his lack of interest in both economics and finance: “I basically tried to immerse myself in finance because I wasn't really that interested in it at the beginning of freshmen year, but my philosophy was kind of, ‘If I study it enough, and if I look into it enough, I think I will become interested in it.’” Similarly, with economics, he admits,

I don't even necessarily find it that interesting as a subject, to be honest. I don't even really fully like economics, but I'm studying it anyway, which I've been advised is probably not the best decision, but nevertheless, it felt like the appropriate thing for me to be studying, given that I wanted a career in finance. I've been assured in recent days that that's not true but at the same time it feels to me that right now, I'm far enough down the path that it's not worth switching because I've taken the intermediate series already...it seems to me like I'm already on a kind of linear path. So there's... I'm fairly set on it, at this point, I would say.

The logic behind Ryan's decision-making illustrates the conscious way in which students apply an economic rationale to their studies. Arguing that his specific conception of utility ought to drive his decision, Ryan finds himself committed to an area of study and possible career trajectory that he admits does not really engage him. He also hints at what he might be sacrificing in order to pursue this set pathway:

My greatest talent is probably writing, interestingly enough. I guess I'm not terribly quantitative, but I just didn't see a career future in English, honestly. A lot of my roommates will probably still maintain that I should be an English major, I should do English 'cause writing comes easily to me and it's something I can enjoy, writing an essay. But I just really don't see a career future in that...

As he perseveres in the direction toward business and finance, Ryan is an exemplar of someone who draws on the student groups at Harvard in order to educate himself about careers in these sectors. He reasons that since “Harvard is primarily a liberal arts college, it's not geared toward finance education in an academic setting.” Therefore, “you really have to rely upon these extracurricular groups or even your own independent study to get a feel for



what finance is and what that career might entail.” He explains that a lot of this work involves “networking and making connections” in order to secure a sophomore internship that can lead to a full time position in the same firm after graduation. Through “word of mouth” and discussion with other group members, participants describe learning about ways to structure a more business or finance-focused curriculum within the constraints of their program. For example, join a business or finance focused club, take on business or finance-related positions on the boards of other student organizations, cross register at MIT for an accounting course.

These student organizations serve as a kind of gateway to jobs in finance and consulting by coordinating various opportunities for students to learn more about potential careers through presentations and relevant work experiences. For example, Ryan, who is committed to pursuing one of these careers, describes going on a trip to Wall Street organized by the Veritas Financial Group early in his sophomore year. Members were given tours of the offices at JP Morgan, Goldman Sachs, and Barclays and “received various presentations that day regarding Sales and Trading versus IBD [Investment Banking Division].” Furthermore, the presence of corporate recruiting events early on in the year attracts sophomores, like Ryan, who are eager to begin educating themselves about these options. Ryan describes, “I thought it was really cool that all these banks can come to school. I've been attending some of them like Credit Suisse, Morgan Stanley's been here, giving all these information sessions... They make it sound really cool, so I want to check it out more to see what those people are doing.”

Ryan explains that for him, the biggest challenge right now is deciding on which of these two paths to pursue as he tries to predict which one he would enjoy more. He believes it is a crucial decision because it will impact which recruiting processes he will participate in.

Ideally, he hopes to secure a sophomore internship, which would lead to a junior internship at the same firm and then a job offer after graduation. In order to gather the information he needs, Ryan attends events in order to network. These activities are a major component of how he spends his time and can threaten to overshadow his academic work. Ryan tries hard to maintain the right balance and prioritize his studies whenever possible. He anticipates the demand on his time for these activities will increase even more next year as he enters the process of trying to secure a junior internship at a major firm: "From what I understand, networking gets pretty heavy in terms of finance internships, so people spend a lot of time going to all of these events, trying to meet and email as many people as they can and really get their foot in the door of some of these bulge bracket firms and big name firms."

Ryan is an example of a student who ultimately feels ambivalent about his decision to adhere to this path of "what Harvard students do." He simultaneously completes the necessary steps towards this pathway while also questioning: "What am I doing with my life?...Am I actually studying anything that's going to lead me to a meaningful career? And also what entails a meaningful career? ...What am I interested in and how do I pursue that?" As the year progressed, Ryan began to question his logic and consider more seriously the feedback he was getting from his peers who were encouraging him to examine his motivations and interests more critically. He describes:

My greatest talent is probably writing. Interestingly enough, I guess I'm not terribly quantitative, but I just didn't see a career future in English, honestly. A lot of my roommates will probably still maintain that I should be an English major, I should do English 'cause writing comes easily to me and it's something I can enjoy - writing an essay. But I just really don't see a career future in that, personally...

Finding himself in economics classes that he "didn't find terribly interesting," Ryan recounts in our second meeting after he declared his concentration,

I shopped a class this semester that was Ec1760, it was Topics in Finance, and, I was like, "If I'm going to do finance, maybe I should do this class," and I decided on the

first day, I just couldn't even stand it. I was like, "I'm not going to take this class." As interesting, as useful as this might be, there has to be a certain level where I'm just not willing to do it just because of its utility.

For other students who experience a similar conundrum, the stakes can be even higher as a result of poor academic performance due to a poor match in skill set and subject matter. Jackie, the student who suddenly found herself committed to five leadership roles in campus organizations and feels she is constantly “catching-up” with all her work, came to Harvard determined to study economics.

Coming from a low-income, single parent family, she is also determined to secure a job in banking and finance so she can provide for her mother and brother. Though she did not have any economics classes in high school, a banking internship after her high-school senior year gave her “exposure...that all of a sudden made it clear” that she should do economics. So far, she has not performed well in her economics classes. She reports receiving feedback from an adviser that perhaps economics is not the best match for her, but she only questions herself for a brief moment: “Maybe I should do something that I love...that I can be passionate about.” But she explains that studying economics “was just set for me. I didn’t really consider other options. I’ve always taken it as a given.” Jackie struggles to face the emerging incongruities of her plan and remains committed to her path despite the warning signs that this may not be the best option for her. It does not cross her mind that perhaps she would have a better chance at securing the jobs she is so intent on with a strong academic record, regardless of concentration area, compared to a weak academic record in economics.

### **“Doing it for the Right Reasons”**

One third of students describe discovering a sustained sense of engagement with

economics throughout the academic year. They discuss the alternative career pathways they have discovered, in addition to the standard options in finance and consulting. They describe the possibility of pursuing graduate studies in economics, working in public service as an elected official and through joining the military, running a small business, and running a start up. Interestingly, the decision about whether or not to participate in recruiting events and explore options in finance and consulting is strenuous even for these students. Andrew, who dreams of opening his own restaurant one day, talks about his “passive avoidance” of recruiting events. He believes it is important for him to develop a clearer idea of what his interests and goals are before exposing himself to this realm of information. He explains, “I think because I have no idea what I want to do, I'm not really jumping at the bit to figure out who I want work for, because I'm going to have to drill other things down first before doing that.”

The challenge of avoiding this process reflects the prevalence of recruiting events on campus. Louis, who has discovered a passion for pursuing graduate-level economics and is “very seriously trying to become a professor,” also expresses his hope that he will be able to avoid this typical career pathway. He explains, “I've contemplated going into investment banking, but like, if I can not do it, I will be very excited.” Louis declares he would consider it a success if he can avoid this trajectory. His phrasing is telling; it illuminates the pervasiveness of this pathway and how students are susceptible to going with the flow unless they actively resist and search for alternatives. Nevertheless, Louis reports on his plans in a later interview:

I have an application out at JP Morgan and I will put another one out in Google. Honestly though, like the internship... If I were to enter into finance or whatever, it would probably be just like a two-year thing. I really did not want that to be my ultimate career goal because, I'm in Veritas Financial Group now, and I'm just like... Business Finance is interesting, but what really interests me is Economic theory, like finding out new things, understanding new concepts and understanding why people

behave in certain ways and looking at problems with models that exist now. Business is more of just like "Okay, how will you maximize profit?"

Like the rest of the students in this cluster of participants, Louis describes himself as different from most economics concentrators because he “actually finds the subject matter interesting.” He defines himself in contrast to others whom he describes as wanting to study economics because they decided they want the “money and power” from doing finance. Yet, he reveals he has an application for an internship at JP Morgan even though he is “not terribly interested” in the idea of finance:

If I were to enter into finance, it would probably be just like a two-year thing. I really did not want that to be my ultimate career goal because, I'm in Veritas Financial Group now, and I'm just like... Business Finance is interesting, but what really interests me is Economic theory.

It is striking how students view working in finance and consulting almost as an extension of their curriculum at Harvard; even those who have clear alternative goals feel compelled to acquire the skills and gain experience in these realms beforehand. Immersed in the frenzy of recruiting season, students describe that it can feel like the only concrete option in front of them. Participating is so “convenient” and “streamlined” that it is difficult, perhaps even unwise, to abstain from the process.

A repetitive refrain I heard from students who expressed genuine engagement with economics was the self-critical question of whether they were “doing it for the right reasons.” This mode of expression suggests a level of self-consciousness about what they understand as the broad narrative around what motivates students to choose economics in the first place. Courtney, who discovered her aptitude for studying economics as a freshman and who excelled in her classes, is contemplating serving in the military and studying economic and political policy in the Middle East. She expresses the dilemma she faces as she considers her future options: “Do I sell out and do consulting or finance, work in a

corporation?” Similarly, we have already met Nathan, who described his hesitation around telling people about how much he enjoyed Ec 10 and that he was actually considering it as a concentration. He reports that his wariness centers on people assuming he is only choosing economics because of the perceived connection to business.

The narrative of “what Harvard students do” is so prevalent that even students who explicitly have no interest in finance are compelled to participate in the process of recruiting, especially if they are uncertain about their career goals. Lily describes the pressure she feels to explore this route: “Since I don't really know what I want to do, it seems like since everyone else is trying to go into finance, so that's what I should be doing too.” She imagines she will try to secure a finance internship “just to make sure” it is not something she wants to do. Her own uncertainty is a source of self-doubt as she sees many of her peers who seem so certain about their goals. Like Kevin, she wonders if this is also what she should be focused on:

It seems like everyone is so sure about wanting to go into finance, and I'm not sure if I want to at all...It's kind of weird, because in my mind I can't really see myself doing that in the future, but right now, seeing everyone so... Not obsessed, but so focused on those types of internships, it makes me feel "Oh, is that something I should be doing, too?”

The sense of pressure Lily and many others students feel to live up to this narrative of achievement that extends from their status as Harvard students into the finance and consulting world presents a real challenge. The sudden loss of structure and pre-determined goals (i.e. to get into college) that dominated students' high school experiences can be disorienting for many students. This anomie can lead to an urgent feeling to quickly establish new goals and pathways to achieving those goals. Lily explains, “I feel like a lot of people here already know what they want, or generally have a sense of what they want to do in the future... So it's not like they're putting pressure on me to decide, but I'm putting pressure on

myself to decide.’

Competition and prestige is also a driving factor. When describing her feelings about a job in banking or finance, Annie asserts unequivocally: “I don't want those hours. I'm not interested. I don't like math, I'm not very quantitative. Obviously Finance is not for me.”

Yet, she continues to take steps toward this path by participating in organizational and recruiting events. She explains:

I feel like Harvard students are generally very concerned about, I don't know if I want to say appearance, but it's their own academic standing or their own accomplishments...And since these [jobs] are all so competitive, it's just like another competition for them to see who can get into the best bank or firm. I think the reason I'm pressured is because of the competition, not because of the aspect of the work itself...I think I feel pressured because of the competitive aspect of it where everyone is competing for these jobs, and I almost feel like I need to be doing that or else I'm forfeiting before I even enter the competition.

Though it is not surprising that competition would be a motivating force for students in an environment comprised of peers who come from highly achievement-oriented backgrounds, the extent to which they are knowingly and willingly prioritizing being competitive ahead of all other considerations is startling. It raises the question of why some of the best and brightest students feel the need to conform to this standard definition of achievement.

Even within these well-established options, students also seem to distinguish between finance and consulting where finance is the more “hardcore, concrete” realm, and consulting is more “worthwhile” in terms of learning about different industries while acquiring “a skill set like communicating with people or working as a team.” It is appealing to students because they believe it is a career that would value individuals with diverse but “non-specific interests academically.” Furthermore, they are attracted to the rotating schedule of projects that they believe keeps the work fresh and interesting. Students also view more opportunities to contribute to the greater good by helping companies and organizations solve problems. For some, shifting their mindset from being focused solely on

finance to considering consulting is a big change. Kevin describes,

Last semester I got the opportunity to do this recruitment process for McKinsey. I got to the final rounds but I didn't get it. But just the idea that I got to the final round...I was like "maybe, I actually prefer this more than finance", because I was very finance-oriented. And I was like, "No, I want the hardcore, concrete stuff, but not this consulting." I would give so many reasons about why I don't want to get into consulting. But after doing that program, and after just interacting with all these people, I was like, "Maybe finance is not for me after all, maybe I'm more interested in consulting." And yeah, hopefully during recruiting next year, I'll be able to get the opportunity to do some consulting stuff. I mean, I'm hoping to try and recruit for both consulting and finance, but I think consulting will probably have an upper hand for me.

For Kevin, the appeal of "high-end" companies like McKinsey and Bain is rooted not only in knowing he will earn a high salary, which is very important to him; he also values the prestige that comes with the affiliation. He likens securing a job at these companies to getting in to Harvard: Just as "Harvard opens all these doors for you," he reasons, so too will these companies open doors for him down the road, whether to graduate school or future job opportunities. Students do not think of going into consulting as a long-term career but rather as a temporary training ground that provides excellent "exit opportunities" that can launch them into the next phase of their working life. One student reports that her organization, Harvard Women in Business, strives to introduce members to the diverse aspects of business, "not just finance and consulting which is what most people think about, but also like tech, and entrepreneurship, and startups...so, it's nice to see I'm not restricted to only finance."

Over the course of the year, one third of the economics students re-considered their decision and rationale for choosing economics for these very reasons. Students describe evaluating their motivations and goals, some for the very first time. Strikingly, students' determination to pursue economics toward the goal of working in business and finance is based on very vague conceptions of what these realms of work actually entail. As they begin



to learn more about what economics and business is actually about through courses and internships, they must reconcile their preconceptions with their experience. By the end of their sophomore year, some participants remained committed to economics due to either discovering a genuine interest in economics or perceiving a lack of alternatives, while others re-evaluated their decision as they gained more insight into their own interests and abilities. Ultimately, one third discovered a genuine interest in the field and a variety of career options in relation to their field that they had not thought of before, one third remained committed to but ambivalent about their choice, and one third changed their minds and declared a different concentration.

Though many students who began to realize that economics is not what they thought it would be are resistant to changing course, several students did re-evaluate their decisions and made changes before the end of the year. Two students switched to psychology primarily because they did not perform as well in economics as they had hoped, and were also open to changing their minds throughout the process. Three switched to applied math for the more specialized content, smaller department and sense of community, and the greater prestige of being affiliated with a more quantitative field. Two students relegated Economics to a secondary rather than primary concentration as they strategized aligning their academic focus with their career goals. A student who is interested in working in the business side of the pharmaceutical industry switched to Molecular and Cellular Biology with a secondary in Economics, and a student interested in working in the Energy industry switched to Environmental Science and Public Policy with a secondary in Economics. They rationalize keeping economics in the mix so they could continue to learn about business, which they believe will be pertinent to their future work.

Jake is another example of a student who began to question his focus on economics.

He arrived at Harvard determined to pursue economics because he believed it is “the closest thing” related to getting a job on Wall Street. With no background in economics, he was hoping to discover a true interest in the field, even though he struggled at first with the academic work. Once he got a handle on how to approach assignments, he describes feeling better able to assess his interest level. As the term unfolded, he found himself disengaged from the material yet feeling compelled to stick to his decision. Like many of his peers, he finds it difficult to change course: “I’ll set my mind on something, and then that’s what I’m doing and I don’t want to change it.” While other participants in my study resist changing direction even as they have similar experiences of doubt and disengagement, Jake decides to try something different. He reports, “I realized towards the end of the term that I didn’t really like Ec 1010a, which was the class I took... I kind of realized that Ec wasn’t... I wasn’t doing Ec for the right reasons.” Following his interest in math, he declared Government as a placeholder and said he is exploring Applied Math as a possible concentration. His decision reflects his stated ideal of first and foremost wanting to choose a concentration that he “genuinely enjoys.” But he also admits that if he is unsuccessful in branching out, he will return to economics as his focus.

Participants confirmed a belief amongst students that the majority of people do economics because “they want to make a lot of money in the future” and that economics “goes directly into consulting” and is a “lead-in to finance.” For the same reasons, economics is also a good “default” or “generic” concentration to pursue. The reasoning is, if they can’t find a passion, at least they will be on pathway toward a secure financial future. On the one hand, some describe it as having a reputation as an easy concentration with few requirements, and other have the impression that it is getting harder in order to “weed” out people who are not necessarily “doing it for the right reasons.” This refrain came up in

several of my conversations with students, particularly those who contemplated changing away from Economics. This question about whether they, or someone else, is pursuing this concentration for the right reasons centers around the idea that many people take it not because they are interested but because they believe it will give them the capital they need in order to secure a lucrative job post-graduation.

Sara explains, “at the end of day, a lot of people who want to go to Wall Street or consulting would do Economics.” This troubles her to see because, as she states, “I don't agree with the fact that people come in here at 18 and think, “Oh, I'll go to Wall Street,” without even letting themselves let go for a second, and think, “Well maybe, that's not what you really want.” She describes seeing many of her friends go through this process and how “that bubble breaks for a lot of people” after they do summer internships and realize their dream job is not what they expected it to be.

The extended conversations I was able to have with participants in economics clearly illuminate the dominance of the this narrative of “what Harvard students do.” They each described their varied experiences of this trajectory – at once feeling “swept up” by the momentum of this narrative while also examining their own motives and weighing their decisions. Their narratives highlight both the heavy draw of these conceptions of success associated with their group identity as Harvard students, as well as the influential role of peers in actively encouraging as well as questioning the rationale behind a student’s decision. By extension, their narratives highlight the role of context as an influential factor in their decision-making. Beyond the expectations surrounding their group identity, the many resources, events, and opportunities available to participants as Harvard students certainly impacts their choices. Participants describe tapping into an extensive network of peers, student organizations, alum, and corporate recruiting events in the process of solidifying

their decision, and the rationale behind their decision. Furthermore, what struck me was that even though participants arrived with limited knowledge about what is involved in studying economics and working in business and finance, their narratives suggest they arrived knowing it was something they deliberately wanted to educate themselves about given what they knew about “what Harvard students do.” In addition to perceiving the relationship between economics and business as a natural connection, participants limited exploring possible alternatives in order to stay on track, which also contributed to their sense this was an easy decision to make.

### **Limiting Academic Exploration**

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the majority of participants (72%) in this study arrived at Harvard believing they already knew what they would study. Amongst the economics students, fourteen out of twenty fall into this category, the majority of whom pre-identified economics as their subject of choice. Participants described the various ways in which limiting their exploration of subjects other than economics made the decision to choose economics easier for them. First, students with proven or potential interests in other subject areas intentionally restricted themselves from exploring those areas so they would not be distracted from their goals. Second, students who believe they do not excel in any particular area and/or lack any specific academic passion, described selecting economics as a default choice and limited exploring because they did not feel it would be helpful. Finally, some students simply did not expect to have the first few terms of college to explore, and therefore arrived already committed to a plan of action.

Over half of the economics students in this study describe having a passion or interest in areas of study other than economics, but intentionally avoided pursuing them.

Often possessing exceptional talent in areas such as music, dance, English, history, and the visual arts, these students purposefully pursued a path away from these particular subjects and did not seriously consider them as possible avenues of study. For example, Annie, who is an accomplished dancer, is among the most uninterested in economics amongst my participants. Yet she remains unwavering in her decision. Annie describes Economics as “a very generic concentration” that a lot of people, including herself use “as kind of a default concentration,” meaning, “if they can't find a passion...then they concentrate on Ec.”

Annie is clear about the fact that nothing about economics engages her intellectually. She is also not attracted to any of the related pathways to jobs in finance and business. Yet, she has decided she will pursue economics, and participate in recruiting for finance and consulting jobs. Annie's decision is somewhat puzzling because of how incongruous it is with the effort she put into establishing independence from her parents' expectations that she would pursue science and be pre-med. Choosing economics was in defiance of her parents' expectations and it took courage to defy them and choose her own path. Yet she selected another area of study in which she seems to have little interest. At first, she is adamant that she does not have a passion for any particular area of study, and claims this lack of passion makes her choice easier. She presumes others may have a more difficult time choosing a concentration because “maybe they just have two passions” and “they can't decide between [the two]. I mean, I'm not particularly passionate about Ec or Psych or anything. I mean, I like it, but... maybe if I find something that I'm super, super passionate about, then I'll have a hard time, but I haven't yet. When I followed up by asking if finding her passion is one of her goals, she responds unexpectedly: “No. Because I like where I am right now.” She emphasizes that it is a stressful time, involving big decisions, and that she believes she must be practical. Prompting her for further information, she admits: “Okay, if I

really wanted to just pursue what I personally really, really love to do, then I would dance. But that's not practical, because I also have to survive for the rest of my life.” In Annie’s mind, her choice to pursue Economics is practical one, and she is glad she is not passionate about it because it makes things simpler, more transactional even. Annie describes this direction in Economics as a default, and how she is also getting swept up in the pressure of recruiting events for consulting and finance jobs. As we read earlier, her motivation to pursue this path is rooted in the need to stay competitive with her peers.

In order to stay focused on their goals, participants describe intentionally avoiding potential areas of study they could have tried because they did not want to be tempted away from economics. Redwood, who has “always been interested in art and architecture in general,” completed IB art as one of her higher-level courses in high school. With many accomplishments in the visual arts and also a deep interest in history, Redwood explains that coming to college, she knew she “didn’t actually want to concentrate in...either History or History of Art and Architecture, because” she explains, “to be perfectly honest, I didn’t think I would be able to find a job after graduation if I concentrated in History, unless I was willing to become an academic and sort of either teach or write textbooks or do something like that. So, I picked Economics.” This decision was easy for her, she explains, because she has yet to actually take a history course, which could potentially distract her. Yet, she also admits to knowing very little about economics when she made the decision to concentrate in it. Going in, she had the impression that it might relate closely to history but somehow be more practical:

So, honestly, before I came here, I've never taken an Economics class because in my high school, it was either take IB History or you take Academic Economics. They didn't have IB Economics and I was in the IB program. So I think that, for some reason, because they allowed us to substitute this too, I had this idea that Economics is a lot more related to History than it actually is.

Searching for a way to make her studies more meaningful to her, Redwood began to think about possible connections between what she was learning in economics and her longstanding interest in environmental conservation. A native of California, she is certain she would like to return to her state after graduating and reasons that she could likely find a job that would draw on her knowledge of economics and the environment. Through her courses and talking with her advisers, Redwood has identified clean energy as a potential area of interest. She describes, “for some reason- this may be sort of a stereotypical view - but I feel like energy, economics, the environment is a more secure, sort of degree to get in terms of getting a job than in Art History.” Still tackling the introductory level economics courses during the time of our interviews, Redwood expressed her hope that she will one day feel as engaged by her studies in economics as she was by her studies in art and history:

I'm hoping that once I start taking those courses that are more focused, less introductory, in Economics, that I will be more interested in what I'm learning. I do like what I'm learning in Ec 1010 and what I learned in Ec 10. It just wasn't necessarily something that, at the time, I was like, "Oh my gosh, I'm really interested in this and I'm really excited to be studying this." Once I learned it, I loved that I could apply it to everything around me but... For example, for my History of Art and Architecture course, when I was studying for the midterm, I actually really was excited about studying. I loved what I was reading, I loved memorizing these various... We had to memorize, I think, 50 or 60 paintings with the artist and the day, and all kinds of information on them, and I was really excited by that. I've yet to have that feeling with Economics. I'm just hoping that it will come later, once I take courses that are more geared towards the field I want to go into. The hardest part of declaring Economics is not knowing when that point will come or if that point will come.

The hope that studying economics will spark their interest over time, and that things will “get better” was a repetitive refrain amongst participants. For Jake, taking introductory Economics was a “rude awakening” because of his poor performance on tests and assignments: “So it's definitely not exactly what I expected it to be... And that's partially because I didn't know really what Economics was so it was kind of just one of those things that sounded cool.” He recounts the now familiar logic of how he decided to pursue this

path: "I thought that "Oh, yeah, if I want to maybe work on Wall Street or something, you have to do Economics," which obviously isn't the case, but that's kind of the mindset, and it was wrong, but it was the mindset that I had coming in."

As the term progresses, Jake becomes increasingly concerned by his lack of engagement with the material. Yet the more he invests in this direction, the more difficult he thinks it will be for him to change course: "now that I know kind of what it's about, I don't *not* like it, but sometimes it's like... That was actually a big concern with any of the concentrations because I was like, "Do I have the thing for it?" Because I'm the type of person that I'll set my mind on something, and then that's what I'm doing and I don't want to change it." Jake is invested in his decision, and even though he is not enjoying his classes now, he is "banking on the fact that it's going to get better" in junior and senior year, when he can take more focused seminars on topics that interest him. He explains, "It's definitely been challenging because...I don't know for a fact... Like it's not something that I'm extremely, extremely passionate about yet which is kind of concerning to me...But it's just kind of thing where I think it's going to get better."

Similarly, Jackie, the student who is set on getting a high-paying job in finance in order to support her mother and brother, and firmly believes studying economics will help her achieve her goals, also expresses the hope that she will eventually feel engaged by her studies:

I like the concept [of economics], and like I said before, it does open doors to a lot of things, so it's very broad, can apply to a lot of things.. I'm a little still a bit hesitant about whether it's the right fit for me, but I thought it's the best fit at the moment. Quite frankly, since I need a quick-fire concentration, and I've been set on this for about two years, it doesn't give me a lot of time... for anything else. So quite frankly, I'm a little bit like, this is it...I know that the first two years may be rough 'cause you're just learning the basics, but once you can go above that, you will definitely have a better time. So, I'm waiting for that. It's a waiting game...



Like Redwood, Jackie also gave up her interest in the arts as well as other subject areas such as Romance Languages and Literature and Psychology. When I asked her if she felt she was missing anything from her educational experience, she replied,

I miss Art. I wish I could do Art but I can't because I already have... I still have to complete my Gen Eds and I still have to finish my citations. And I already have to do a lot of extra-curriculars... I miss Art a lot. I used to do art... I used to do painting, charcoal, ceramics, photography, dance. None of those things are in my life now, which is really annoying.

Jackie explains that at one point, she did consider whether concentrating in Visual and Environmental Studies would be an option for her, but concluded at the time, that “it didn’t seem logical.” She felt she should devote her time to doing things that would help to build her resumé. For Jackie, choosing to study economics was an easy decision because, in addition to being a practical choice, she believes her academic ability is limited. Jackie explains that while other people may have many interests and talents that can be applied to many things, she does not have as many options: “I mean, if I had a science mind, I would have a hard time choosing between all the different Sciences, 'cause they're like broken up entirely, whereas Economics is just Economics or like Applied Math and Economics, and I'm not that good.” Furthermore, Jackie views the decision as having already been made long before she had to formally declare her concentration:

The reason declaring my concentrations wasn't that big a deal for me was that I had pretty much declared it a long time ago in my mind... I really just want to get a good finance job and know what I'm doing because of my concentration in economics, and one day provide for my mom and brother. That's what I value most.

Jackie's narrative highlights the way in which this shared belief provides a further level of perceived security associated with economics. Because the path is seemingly so clear, students believe that choosing economics is akin to securing the future because economics students “know what they are going to do” by the time they graduate.

Finally, some students did not view their first few years of college as a time for

exploration in the first place. They approached college already with clearly defined limits in mind, either due to family or community pressure, or simply having decided on an academic trajectory in high school.

Louis arrived at Harvard having already decided he would concentrate in Economics. He describes using high school as time for “gauging what I was interested in and what I wanted to do” so that “by the time I got to college I kind of already knew.” In part, he was under the impression that this was something he needed to figure out before starting college, and did not realize he would have time in his first few terms to explore. A very self-directed student, Louis majored in AP Interdisciplinary Studies at his public high school where students could also choose from “Auto Tech,” “Culinary Arts,” and “Health Sciences” amongst others. As a part of his curriculum, he took a course in Government and Economics, which he says helped him realize “the usefulness of Economics.” His interest in this course prompted him to read more about Economics over the summer, which solidified his decision to pursue it in college. Louis believes choosing a concentration was easy for him because he had a focused plan; like others, he suggests that having too many passions or interests might make the decision more difficult in the long run, something he has observed amongst his peers. He explains,

The thing that helped me is the fact that I... I needed to be able to see down the road and see "Okay, this is a career path I could choose." Or "Here's another possible career path I could choose." But if you're really interested in a lot of different things - I mean I am interested in a bunch of different things - it's just like, some things I would not want to do as a career. So if you're potentially interested in a lot of different things, I mean I could easily see you struggling with your concentration.

Though Louis also excelled in English during high school, he explains he never really considered it as a college major because he “couldn’t see where [he] would take it” as a future career path. While he is aware of the liberal arts notion that his course of study does not define the career he will eventually enter, he does not believe that is how things work in

practice. He explains,

I think people have a hard time believing that because, I mean... there's a stigma kind of attached to that idea. People [think] "Oh, I could never major in Music, and then, like go to med school." People just don't... Even though it is possible and I definitely know people who are trying to do things like that, I just don't think people really believe too heavily that it's possible.

Louis attributes this skepticism and doubt to the pervasive cultural narrative of the economic purpose of higher education: "People have classically heard..." If you want to become an investment banker, you should major in like Economics or Business or something," and so despite hearing the contrary, students look for what they perceive as the most direct path to their future goals. He notes his family generally supports his decision to pursue economics, though his sister does not miss a beat: she "always teases me and says "You're going to...go to do business and become a professional thief!" He explains, "she's just joking with me about investment banking and how they run their corporations and stuff." Even his younger sister is aware of the common narrative around "what Harvard students do," giving her brother a subtle warning about the expectations he will have to contend with as a Harvard student studying economics, as well as the ethical dimensions of this line of work in contemporary times.

### **"Not totally free": Legitimacy and the Liberal Arts**

The international students in this study brought an interesting perspective on academic exploration in the context of a liberal arts education. Mary, who is from East Africa, discusses how she purposefully came to the United States and to Harvard for a liberal arts education. She explains that in her country, the top students are selected in high school for professional tracks in medicine, engineering, and law. Though she was slated to attend a top engineering school, she was not sure whether this was something she actually wanted to

do. With an influential mentor back home who is a Harvard alum, Mary decided she wanted a liberal arts education, so she could “make decisions as I go” rather than commit early on to a professional career track.

Ironically, though Mary notes that she and some of her peers from the same country apply to U.S. colleges in order to “escape from” the prescribed educational pathways they would be subject to back home, they are “not totally free” of family and community expectations. While on the one hand she chose to come to Harvard for a more flexible approach to a college education, she also explains that choosing a concentration was easy for her because she is still operating within certain constraints that she believes are more limiting than what her American counterparts face. Mary explains that most of the students at Harvard from her country end up pursuing electrical engineering or economics. She believes that despite the many options at Harvard, she must pursue a path that her family and community will find acceptable. She is beholden to their beliefs that the only legitimate areas of study are medicine, law, engineering, and economics, and imagines the reaction she would receive if she strayed from these expectations: “Like, when you go back home, you will not go and say, “I’m doing Folklore and Mythology,” ‘cause everyone will be like, “We sent all the way to America to do that?” And so here it ends up being like Engineering, like Electrical Engineering and Computer Science.” The other acceptable option is economics, which she says “a lot of people are inclined to...they do economics because they say, “After I do Economics, I’ll probably fit into any career world I want to venture into later on.” Mary further explains the freedom she perceives in her choice:

Economics is still not restricting me too much... if I decided to be pre-med, I’d feel so restricted. But just in the same nature, like students from West Africa, a lot of them are pre-meds, if you check. A lot of them end up being pre-med and I guess it’s still the same mentality: we’re expected to do courses that are considered prestigious, you know, so yeah.

Limiting herself to these specific subjects does not particularly trouble Mary, since, as she describes, she did not “grow up in a culture where people understand the whole idea of liberal arts.” She is comfortable with accepting the expectations of her family and community. In contrast, she describes of her American peers, “by the time they come to college, they know that they have all these options open for them, and choosing from those many options probably ends up being hard.” She compares her own experience: “while for me, it's like, I can't really say I'm free from the whole idea of me doing what people expect me to do. So, I feel like I was limited to just very few concentrations to choose from while someone else is probably not limited with that and it ends up being really hard for them to choose.”

Mary describes gatherings amongst peers from her country on campus, where they discuss their academic plans. She recalls vividly a single student who decided to pursue a different path: “We actually, like right now, have only one friend of ours who's an English concentrator. It's kind of weird to everyone. We don't come here and do Literature or Humanities...” Rather than “going with the flow,” her friend is “passionate about English” and decided to make it her focus, but not without raising considerable concern amongst her peers. Mary describes how she and her peers asked her friend emphatically, “*what* are you doing?” She attributes their wariness to the shared belief amongst them and their communities back home that “if you take some certain concentration, you will not make it in life. Or maybe it's not that you will not make it in life, but rather you will not achieve some other things that people will achieve.” Though Mary is describing the views of her family back home, she echoes the concerns of participants from a variety of backgrounds included in this study. These views do not stray far from the shared logic we have already heard about how to make the most out of a Harvard education.

Some departments have attempted to respond to these concerns in hopes of encouraging students to branch out more and take intellectual risks. Mary gives the example of the African and African-American studies department, “where they're really trying to rally us, maybe just people from Africa, to... declare it as a concentration.” She describes “people from Africa, they come here, and they take a few classes” in the department and are noticed by professors because of their high level of engagement and performance in the courses:

The professors are like, "You should declare it your concentration. You seem to be really enjoying this and you seem to be really engaged, why don't you just declare it as a concentration?" And then one is like, "No, my mom back at home will think I'm crazy to come to the US and study about Africa in the US."

In order to counteract this belief and students' concerns about future employment, Mary describes how just recently, the department is

constantly telling us about these two African students who did a concentration in that department and how one of them is working at Goldman Sachs and how the other one is working at Morgan Stanley, and they're going to business school very soon, to kind of like dispel the idea that if you did African or African-American studies, you can't end up in like the finance world or the tech world. You can still do it, depending on how passionate you are about whatever you did. And they've been doing that 'cause that's like definitely has an impact on students, like making you realize, "No matter which concentration I do, even if I do Folklore and Mythology, I can still end up in finance. I can still end up in Wall Street if that's what I'm passionate about in life."

While Mary, like others, is skeptical about how this actually plays out in practice, she marvels at how students in subjects such as history and literature and folklore and mythology have a true passion for their studies, and are even willing to risk societal disapproval to pursue their passions. In contrast, she describes that economics concentrators, herself included, are not usually the happiest people about what they are doing, but she rationalizes that she will be “happy about what I'll be doing after I'm done with concentrating on Econ. It's like what I will be capable of doing and how I will be capable of thinking.” Oddly, while a lack of passion was a factor in her decision not to pursue science and engineering, it does

not seem to play in to her decision to concentrate in economics. Mary describes taking a difficult pre-med class and an engineering class during her freshman year just to be sure she did not want to pursue those subjects. She confirmed her lack of passion in these areas and reasons, “if I don't have that passion, I don't think I'll survive in this concentration. It would probably crush me. I'd be like, what am I even doing here in the first place?” Yet, she admits her decision to pursue economics is based on the prospect of future happiness rather than current engagement or sense of passion.

Finally, some students limited their academic exploration by creating their own categories for making sense of their options. This strategy helped them determine which subjects to include or exclude as worthwhile options to consider. Nathan determined early on that economics would be the most practical path and since he did well and enjoyed the introductory course, he was affirmed in his decision. He imagines that had he not performed well, choosing economics may have been a more challenging experience since it would have been hard to reconcile the fact that he was not actually good at the subject he considered to be “the natural alternative.” He suspects others might have a hard time choosing for precisely this reason: even if they are not good at economics or do not enjoy it, it is hard for them to explore other things because they view it as the most viable option. For Nathan, economics matches his beliefs about what constitutes a legitimate area of study. He suggests that people who lack a set of criteria for what they are looking for might have a harder time choosing:

I have this construct in my mind about what studies are about something that's “real” or something that's like a man-made construct. So when I think of something like law or English, I think of it as man-made like we've made our own rules. But when I think about math or physics or economics, like things that are deductive, it feels more legitimate to me...I haven't really thought about it, it's just formulated itself in my head – but for people who don't have that you suddenly have twice as many options... As an eighteen or nineteen year-old, how are you really supposed to know what you want to do with the next four-fifths of your life?

Nathan's rationale highlights the arbitrary nature of the distinctions some students make between different academic subjects and the basis for their perceived legitimacy. Yet it is arguable that his logic also reflects the broader cultural narrative about the economic purpose of education that privileges quantitative ways of knowing, which is incorporated early on in students' schooling experience. Nathan also highlights the weight that students place on their concentration decision – that it is viewed as a choice that will shape “the next four-fifths” of their lives. He calls attention to the conundrum that students' are expected to make this important decision with relatively little information or experience in the subject matter at hand.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that a shared narrative of “what Harvard students do” is a central reference point amongst participants as they make decisions about their own educational trajectories through Harvard and their future goals. I show the ways in which this narrative draws on an economic rationale and is furthermore centered on a notion of achievement that is associated with participants' group identity as Harvard students.

The pervasiveness of this narrative amongst students reflects the crucial role of context in shaping students' beliefs and actions: despite their varied stances and attempts to distinguish themselves, the majority of economics students in this study all feel compelled to at least participate / compete in the recruiting process to secure a lucrative job in finance or consulting. I have shown the ways in which this trajectory is perceived as the path of least resistance by students, who, despite their level of interest and/or ability, view economics as the most relevant in real-world application, as a substitute for a degree in business, and as a signal of competitive edge and prestige. I show the various rationales students provide for



limiting their academic exploration in order to stay focused on an area of study they perceive as more legitimate than others.

An examination of students' narratives reveals the various components of the economic rationale behind the conception of "what Harvard students do." Participants draw on a discourse of practicality in their decision-making that involves the following elements: 1) a separation between practicality and happiness in their choice of study; 2) a technical rational view on education that privileges quantitative skills and ways of knowing as more practical; 3) pay range expectations that will be "decent" enough to live on comfortably and pursue hobbies and a certain lifestyle, and 4) a concern for prestige and elite status achieved through competition for particular work opportunities. Following this logic, the economics students in this study overwhelmingly set aside their current happiness and engagement, investing instead in the promise of future happiness through financial freedom.

## Chapter 6. Resisting the “larger impulse”: Choosing the Arts in the Context of Harvard

*I think concentrating in VES was a risk in and of itself. It is not a practical concentration. It's not pre-professional in any sense. And a lot of people don't see it as a legitimate pursuit of education. So, it's like, "You went here to study Visual and Environmental Studies, like what is that?" And then you have to go into that spiel, and then once they narrow it down, it's like, "Oh, this is art. Like why would you..." So, it's very stigmatized, I think."*

- Kayla

The majority of economics students in this study described choosing their concentration as an easy decision because of its perceived connection to their future goal of working in business. In contrast, the *lack* of an obvious connection to a future career is one of the central reasons the arts students found their choice challenging. This difference is made more complex when we contextualize it in the narrative of “what Harvard students do.” Whereas students who pursue economics are on a trajectory that aligns with this group identity, students who pursue the arts must justify a decision that is perceived to go against pervasive beliefs about how to make the most of a Harvard education.

I found that participants who chose to concentrate in the arts framed their decision as a risk precisely because they are picking a path that – from their point of view - conceivably forgoes all of the assurances of what is available to them as Harvard students. They must counter beliefs that their “impractical” choice puts their future careers, income, and elite status at stake. Their precarious position stands in contrast to the common belief that economics students “know what they are going to do” by the time they graduate, and that they will be well positioned in each of these respects. In this chapter, I will discuss how participants manage this perceived risk in order to pursue their decision with confidence. First, I will discuss how participants had to shift their conceptions of academic legitimacy and of the relationship between their studies and future work, which enabled them to take

this alternate path. Second, I will discuss how these participants particularly draw on the philosophy of a liberal arts education in order to justify their decision to pursue the arts. Specifically, I found that participants addressed the perceived gap between their studies and a potential future career in at least two ways: 1) by focusing on developing and fusing *substantive and technical* knowledge in a specialized area of interest in preparation for entering a competitive professional field, and 2) by being open to compromise, either exploring peripheral areas of work related to their specific area of interest *or* exploring new and unknown avenues for future work that may or may not be related to their current studies.

### **I. The Arts: “A risky choice”**

As we saw in the previous chapter, participants in this study describe having to contend internally and externally with a shared concept of “what Harvard students do.” This concept is comprised of two separate but often interrelated beliefs. First, that securing a lucrative job in business, finance, or consulting (“going to Wall Street”) is a measure of ultimate success, indicating you have put your Harvard education to good use. And second, that studying economics is a stable and preferred path to this outcome. The arts students, whose trajectories do not match this narrative, must therefore justify their decision to themselves, their peers, parents, and other influential people in their lives. As we learned, students believe it requires “a lot of confidence” in order to choose a less popular pathway through Harvard. The significance of this departure from the mainstream narrative of “what Harvard students do” is reflected in participants’ acknowledgement that choosing to concentrate in the arts was a risky decision, if not the biggest risk they have taken so far at Harvard.

Cameron’s narrative about his departure from the sciences to focus jointly instead on

Music and Studies in Women, Gender, and Sexuality, illuminates the considerations students' typically must negotiate when taking an alternate path. Cameron arrived at Harvard believing he would study Chemistry, an academic strength he honed in high school as a part of his strategy to gain admission to the best colleges. He explains that he was a "very goal-oriented, driven high school student" who was determined to excel academically and in his extracurricular activities. As a result, he explains, "I really had my stuff together for the college application process." In addition to taking all the most difficult courses offered by his school, he also took courses in Chemistry and advanced level math at a well-known college in his town, and worked with a counselor on his college applications.

Given his high performance in Chemistry, which is something he "has always been good at", Cameron planned to major in Chemistry at Harvard and build upon the tradition of scientists in his family. At the time he arrived as a freshman, he believed that the sciences in general were "so much better than Humanities because Science was just like, you're given a problem and you've got an equation and you just do it. You plug and chop. There's not really that much room for argument." This approach appealed to him because once you "understand how to work within the system, then you can be really good at it." According to Cameron, this is also precisely how he approached high school:

It was me, working within the system...It was more like I was really good at doing high school than I was, "Oh my God, I'm this extra-ordinary student." I was good at high school. I knew how to get A's in classes with minimal effort. So, maybe that's taking this analogy too far but Science was this safe zone or like where it was memorization and it was repetition, and that just was something that, I suppose, came naturally to me, so it's something I could excel in and feel good about myself.

Despite his initial certainty that he would pursue this path in college, Cameron made some unexpected changes soon after arriving on campus. It began with a decision to explore courses beyond the Life Sciences during his freshman year. He describes taking courses in various departments including Music, Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality (WGS), and

Chinese. For Cameron, operating without a plan, following his interests, and choosing courses by “word of mouth” from his peers was unexpected and exhilarating. He soon began to realize he felt most engaged and rewarded by his non-sciences courses, and for the first time considered that perhaps he was more interested in the humanities.

Cameron’s academic shift evolved in parallel with his emerging sense of self. He believes that, “a large part of the reason why... I sort of switch from that sort of ‘scientific mindset’ is that, it’s probably when I came to college and I became openly gay.” Coming out was a pivotal event for Cameron, who, in an effort to better understand his “place in the world” and the social and structural factors that make coming out a difficult experience for people, decided to educate himself more broadly. He explains,

I feel like coming to terms with part of my identity that isn't exactly favorable or basically stigmatized, definitely made me appreciate like, "Okay, life isn't just one answer." There's not just one single path we all do. There's so much more to understand and analyze about the human experience than just soaring through problem after problem and looking for my answer.

His desire to develop a better sense of his role and “consciousness” in the world led him to take a WGS course on Race, Gender, and Performance, a decision that opened his mind to perspectives he had never considered before. Through the course, he gained “new theoretical perspectives” to help him think about “how we interact with people in respect to what makes gender, what makes race. How do we actually think about these things, and how do we express them through theater? And how do we use theater art as potential for change with respect to these stigmatized categories?”

Cameron’s newfound interest in identity and tolerance for ambiguity also paved the way for him to take courses purely out of curiosity and engagement. Music theory was something that Cameron had always wanted to try because of his extracurricular involvement in music all throughout high school. He decided to take the opportunity to “try

it out” and see how he “could break down something that, on the surface, is so beautiful but when you analyze it, it actually completely makes sense and is almost very scientific also.” In these courses, Cameron was inspired to think about how he could fuse the newfound theoretical frameworks from his WGS courses with his interest in music theory and performance.

Cameron ultimately decided to forego the life sciences completely and pursue a joint concentration in Music and WGS. He views this decision as a major risk because “there's always the worry that, oh, my God, you're like, Humanities, you're not going to be able to find work.” He also considers the exploration of courses that led to his decision risky because for many students, “every class is either going towards their secondary, going towards their major, going towards pre-med requirements.” For Cameron, choosing to take courses without a specific strategy in mind that could just become an elective is not something he believes many other students would do. He explains, “I know other people, for instance, who haven't taken a single elective...it's like every class has a purpose. There's never just like a general intellectual passion that surrounds taking the classes.” Cameron has strived to go against this grain: “I've tried to be guided as much by my intellectual passions instead of filling requirements because I feel that's just more satisfying.”

Yet Cameron is not free of doubt. He worries that future employers will not consider WGS or Music a legitimate subject. At first, he contemplated pursuing WGS as a joint concentration with a scientific discipline, but admits he finally realized that “the Science was just sort of there so my degree would sound impressive, or to make me think that I was getting a real Harvard education.” When he finally decided to drop science and pursue music as a joint concentration instead, he describes, “It's kind of scary to think, ‘Okay, I'm going to give up Science, I'm going to give up anything that is quantitative and will have future job

prospects for me after I graduate."

The concern over whether they should pursue the sciences or economics was a common theme amongst arts participants. In part, this preoccupation relates to a concern over societal pressure of what constitutes a legitimate area of study, and also what is considered more practical. This concern was shared by students who came to Harvard thinking they would pursue science and changed their minds due to exploring alternatives as Cameron did, as well as students who came with a strong inclination toward pursuing the arts but experience moments of doubt over their decision. Cameron, who discovered new interests in his exploration of WGS and Music as a potential joint concentration, explains that the decisions was "easy in that like subconsciously I know what I want to do," but also "difficult in that I have to weave through my feelings about those certain subjects that are sort of separated from my individual interest in them. For instance, external pressure not to be a Humanities concentrator that I maybe faced from my parents or from people saying, 'Oh, yeah, Humanities concentrators will never get a job.'" For many of these students, their interests become clear through the process of exploration but the challenge comes from navigating the social narratives about legitimacy and practicality that make them doubt their decisions. This doubt creates a sense of conflict that students hold when constructing their schedules, often including courses in the sciences or quantitative realms to prove their ability, just in case.

For Cameron, music was ultimately "way too important" to give up on. Furthermore, he sees WGS and Music complementing each other because WGS will give him the relevant theory and frameworks that will inform how and what he composes as a musician. He envisions a creative thesis where he will write a musical that draws on "performance theory as it relates to theater and then combine it with Feminist Theory" to

create a play that is “illuminating about some aspect of gender identity.” Cameron is clear that the musical component of his curriculum is what brings him engagement and joy in his schedule. He foresees a future career possibly as a composer. He explains, “Taking these music classes is something that I can easily see myself doing, like taking one class per semester, until I graduate, and I'd be very happy with that...and I think that it would really be cool to pursue Music as a career after I graduate.”

While a significant component of Cameron's decision-making process was reconciling his original intent to pursue Chemistry with his newfound interest in the humanities, Cameron also describes being pulled by the pressure to conform to the narrative of “what Harvard students do.” At the same time as he is developing his vision of becoming a composer who creates socially inspired music and theater, he is also exposed to his peers who are heavily involved in the recruiting process for jobs in finance and consulting. He admits that learning about these opportunities was enticing to him, particularly as a freshman, when he was more driven by money and the prospect of “leading a luxurious lifestyle.” Yet, he also describes a profound sense of disengagement when he tries to imagine himself in what he describes as these “high-powered” jobs that he sees his friends aiming for: “I just imagine myself just dreading work... I guess all of the big money jobs just seem really boring.” While he tries to focus instead on figuring out what he enjoys, he also acknowledges the professional and financial uncertainty associated with his interests. He explains, “I really enjoy music, theater and being a student. So anything with those would be great, and anything with those is not likely to make me too much money.” He is genuinely concerned about his future prospects.

With this uncertainty in mind, Cameron acknowledges the risk he feels he is taking by “doing something more interesting than concentrating in Government or Economics at



Harvard University, and then working for a consulting firm or working for a financial investment bank.” Cameron describes the challenge of seeing those around him getting swept up into securing corporate internships at high profile firms, particularly in sophomore year, when he also “started thinking about internships.” He felt he had to “think about companies that I may want to work for after college or what I want to do after college...and then all of a sudden it becomes a reality, when you think...this internship is a really important piece on my resume for the next step of finding a job after college.” He also feels the pressure to look into corporate internship opportunities and to take advantage of the opportunity to connect with a company he could possibly work for in the future. However, he resists the recruiting process because ultimately, he explains, “I want to do something unique with my life, something meaningful, something unique.” Cameron tries not to think too much about work when he imagines the future:

I don't think about what I'm going to be doing for a job as one of my main aspirations, as one of the main things I'm looking forward to. Whereas the things that I look forward to are having kids and settling down and going on vacations. The developments that I'm really excited about later in life are less economic, less career-oriented, I suppose.

Other participants also framed choosing the arts as a risk for similar reasons: the perceived risk of pursuing a subject that would not appear legitimate to future employers, the lack of “guaranteed” future jobs and income, and overall somehow not taking full advantage of a Harvard education. Earlier in Chapter 4, we met Adele, the student who decided to concentrate in VES while pursuing pre-med requirements. Like the other arts participants, Adele was concerned about whether VES could really be considered “academic enough” to put at the center of her undergraduate career:

I'm definitely proud of myself that I decided and I took the risk to major in VES when a lot of people, when I tell them, a lot of people are shocked that I go to Harvard and I study Art. But I'm really proud of myself that I was able to put aside what other people thought and even my own fears about what other people would

think, and what it meant to go to Harvard. And for a while, I thought it might be a waste to go to Harvard and study Art, but I'm glad I valued what was important to me over what other people would think.

When she arrived at Harvard, Adele did not think of art as an academic pursuit. She had just considered it as something she enjoyed doing as a hobby. Adele believed she would “have to decide between art and the rest of academics,” and she was quite certain she would end up “choosing academics over art.” “But then,” she explains, “I started thinking about it and I was thinking back to high school and the only classes I enjoyed going to were my art classes... when I came here... I was sort of giving it up and I said: Oh, I'll just do it on the side. But being at Harvard is really busy, you don't really have time to just draw for fun.” Adele quickly realized if she wanted to continue to pursue art, she would have to commit to it as a central component of her academic life.

In order to make the decision, she had to contend with what she describes as the general view amongst students that the arts are easier than other fields of study, particularly quantitative fields, with a lighter workload. Adele describes: “Well, I think [VES] might not get as much respect as other concentrations.” She recounts her roommates’ reactions whenever she talks about how much work she has on her plate; they respond with, “Yeah, but you're a VES concentrator,” as if the work she is doing “doesn’t count.” Adele’s experience reflects the often narrow perspective students have toward what counts as serious, academic work, a broad narrative that even those who have declared the arts must grapple with. In order to remain committed to her decision, Adele continues to negotiate this tension by reminding herself that her engagement is also a valid priority in her academic career. Moreover, she continues to re-conceptualize for herself what it means to get a Harvard education.

This concern for legitimacy is based on strong preconceived notions of academic hierarchy that students are socialized into in high school and perhaps earlier. It also reflects the economic rationale and the types of jobs that are currently valued as more financially rewarding and thus prestigious. Re-assessing their beliefs about academic and professional legitimacy was crucial to students' re-conceptualization of the relationship between their studies and future work.

### **Envisioning the Future**

Participants who chose to study the arts described the fundamental ways in which they had to re-conceptualize how they understood the connection between their studies and their future careers. On the one hand, participants such as Adele talked about having to let go of the idea that what they study will lead directly to their future job, a central component of the economic rationale that students have applied to understanding the connection between economics and working in business. On the other hand, they described how with more experience, they began learning more about potential areas of work related to their interest in the arts that they did not know about before. With greater exposure, students gradually began to envision a future in the arts, which tempered their concerns about the practicality of their choice.

A major turning point for Adele was realizing that her area of study did not necessarily have to coincide with her future career. Acting on the advice of her freshman adviser who was also a pre-medical adviser, Adele made the unconventional decision to pursue VES while also fulfilling pre-med requirements. Her decision reflects her willingness to prioritize her interest and engagement as a learner, despite the concern that she may be giving up a more efficient and “practical” path to medical school by concentrating in one of

the life sciences. In fact, Adele had seriously considered applying to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) at the end of high school given her longstanding interest in visual art. However, she ultimately decided against it because she was worried she was not advanced enough technically. She was also concerned about limiting herself to a domain at this early stage in her education:

I almost applied to RISD, and I got scared. I went and I visited, and I really liked it, but it seemed, also, very intense...they said you could be in studio for, like, six hours at a time. And then the application had a huge portfolio you had to hand in, and at that point, my work wasn't developed enough to submit to a college, because I was just getting into AP art, where you develop a portfolio. So I didn't think I was ready to apply to an art school, and I was also scared if I went to art school and discovered that's not what I wanted, then I'd be stuck.

As an alternative, attending a college with a liberal arts focus appealed to Adele because it would allow her to explore various options even while committing to an area of study. She had planned to pursue science while taking electives in other subjects that interested her, including art. She explains, “I never really thought that I could major in art and also have a career in it. I didn't think it was very practical. So, I thought it was probably more practical to go with my other skills.”

Despite this rationale, Adele was quickly drawn back to art while at Harvard after feeling “lost” during freshman year. Having ultimately declared VES as her concentration, Adele is also striving to meet pre-med requirements at the same time. She often faces scheduling challenges, and her choice of VES courses that do not conflict with her pre-med courses can be limited. Despite a demanding workload between studio and lab work, Adele describes: “at the end of the day, I'm really happy I do VES because I see everyone else stressing out over their classes and homework, and I'm like, ‘Do you even enjoy the class?’ Because even though VES is a ton of work and I'm in the photo lab a lot- and I do a lot of work- I enjoy every minute of it.” As she acquires more experience in VES, Adele reveals

that she is quietly considering the possibility of graduate studies in design in lieu of medical school. But for now, she remains committed to her pre-med trajectory.

Separating her studies from her future work enabled Adele to choose VES, which then created an opportunity for her to learn more about possible career paths related to her field. Other participants also point to how realizing that their undergraduate experience did not define their future career was an important first step to taking a more unconventional route through Harvard. This realization was pivotal to Emily's decision to pursue VES over Micro and Cellular Biology. As we have seen, despite her decision, Emily struggled with shifting her mindset from an achievement-oriented perspective, which made it difficult for her to prioritize her process-oriented VES courses over her test-based science courses.

Emily came to Harvard believing she would study Micro and Cellular Biology but ultimately decided to concentrate in Visual and Environmental Studies. In addition to having to adjust how she prioritizes her time between her MCB and VES courses, Emily also had to shift her beliefs about how her studies will connect to her future career.

For Emily, envisioning her future involved challenging her belief that she was giving up a pathway to "an honored" career in the sciences if she pursued the arts.

Comparing her own sense of engagement while in the animation and drawing studio, versus a more lackluster experience in the science lab, Emily began to ask herself which environment she could envision herself working in for the long term. As Emily describes, this change in direction involved a significant shift in the ways she thinks about herself, how she wants to spend her time in college, and her future career. According to Emily, this choice was challenging for her because:

I felt like it wasn't just defining my undergrad experience, it was defining my career. I felt like, "Oh, if I don't do the sciences I won't ever be able to get into a science field... If I did do science, it would just be like in grad school doing research or something." And so, I felt like by making the decision to go VES, I was choosing

what I wanted to be in life and that was really stressful to choose the freshman year. But I don't know, now that I've really gotten more comfortable with the idea of a career in an art-type field, now the decision wasn't hard anymore. It was quite relieving and exciting.

Emily's trajectory involved a close examination of her interests and a desire to discover what engages her. Her willingness to prioritize interest and engagement as valid justifications for pursuing VES was key in her decision-making. In addition, her ability to shift back and forth between valuing her present engagement with considering future opportunities was important. On the one hand, she had to get past the notion that her undergraduate major would define her career opportunities in order to open herself to the idea of VES. On the other hand, her subsequent research into possible jobs that relate to her interest in animation solidified her confidence in her decision.

### **Academic Legitimacy and Social Relevance**

As participants wrestle with the uncertainties associated with their choice to pursue the arts, they are also developing more complex understandings about the value of their studies, which is key to students' confidence and commitment to their choice. Some participants still struggle to see beyond the arts as more than a personally fulfilling hobby, while others have started to develop more insight into the intellectual and social legitimacy of their pursuits

While Emily is satisfied with her choice to prioritize her interest and engagement in VES, and is hopeful for possible career opportunities as an animator, she believes her choice - while personally fulfilling - is one that will ultimately make her "less impactful in the world" compared to a career in science. She does not yet have a perspective she can articulate on the academic or social relevance of her studies, though she anticipates she will develop this knowledge eventually through her studies. She explains:

I'm still trying to convince myself sometimes a bit, because I'd like to think that art influences the world, or has a huge impact. But sometimes I don't really know yet. I'm hoping as I come to take more VES courses, I'll come to appreciate and fully understand that this concentration really does encompass a global influence.

Similarly, Adele admits she still grapples with having to justify the academic legitimacy of her pursuits to her peers. Her own perceptions of the academic value of art continue to develop as she is exposed to more content and methods through her courses. She explains how in addition to learning to create art, she is learning “how to analyze critically art that's already in the world.” She discusses integrating theory and history and art and discovering “another way to look at the world” and offers the example of her History of Photography course where they investigated propaganda in the 1950s. Adele describes “learning history, but through photographs and how photographs shaped the world, and how the world shaped the photographs that were being made.” For Adele, each course teaches her how to “analyze, looking deeper at what art is, because it really is like a mirror of what the society is, what's going on in the world at that time.” Adele has realized that even something like a movie, “even if it’s not overtly political,” is a medium for understanding “who the people were and what the world was like” in a certain era.

In discussing their evolving notions of the academic and social legitimacy and relevancy of their fields, participants talked about the ways in which the arts are about contextualization, communication, and contribution. First, they talked about studying the various art forms – including visual art, music, and literature – as a way to understand history and the evolution of art as it is shaped by and shapes a society. They articulate that while history allows you an understanding of the origins of ideas, theory gives you the tools to dissect those ideas as they are presented in various media. The realization that art embodies meanings and values that provide a unique window into understanding a certain context and period is important to students, who express the belief that “we can't understand the world

that we live in without understanding the world that we've come from,” and that art is a uniquely human endeavor that is a medium for the pursuit of this knowledge.

Relatedly, participants described the arts as an avenue for communication and shared experience. Students studying music describe it as a more “primal” mode of communication, a language in and of itself: “sounds are a way we communicate, and words are another way we communicate and they are very related, but it's not necessarily the same thing.”

Participants also describe visual art as a language or symbol system that viewers must learn to read. They explain their studies in part as learning the tools for interpretation and analysis that allows the ways of understanding intentionality in art, based on the artist’s purpose and perspective. Participants believe such skills are important because “it makes you understand people's intentions and make you more aware of what you're watching and listening to, whether it's a movie or whether it's everyday life.” Students are learning that a dialogue between viewers’ interpretations and artists’ intentions can create opportunities for shared understanding. Similarly, participants focusing on film describe the sense of community and “sharing that happens for audiences in theatrical experiences,” where there is a collective recognition of the images, interactions, and meanings unfolding before you on the screen. The ability for art to inspire collective meaning and action is also valued by participants, who describe it as a vehicle for social commentary and change.

Finally, students emphasize artistic creation as important aspects of their studies. They believe the hands-on nature of studio courses, music composition, and performance encourages them to think about what they have to contribute and how they want to act on the world. They describe the ways in which art shapes our environment, from a purely aesthetic perspective to a more analytic view. Angela aims to improve her analytic eye through her studies in VES, always asking herself, “how can I make the world more



beautiful?" through visual design. Kayla envisions creating mainstream films that she hopes will inspire new norms for how people think about racial diversity and gender equality: "I want to have control over what people see, and what they're exposed to, and what becomes normal."

Reflecting on the importance of creation, Richard expresses his concern about what he views as the growing distance between creation and consumption, due to the over-professionalization of the arts. He worries that people no longer feel that the arts are something they participate in as creators: "I don't think enough people get a chance to make music and I think that's a sad thing in society...back in the day...most people knew how to play piano and people thought it was fun to buy sheet music and sit down at the piano with their friends and play." He laments that now "music has become this thing where it's either you're really good at it, and you do it professionally or you don't do it at all." For Richard, this divide between production and consumption is problematic because as consumers, the majority of people are limited from participating in what he believes is a "crucial activity" and "part of the human experience of self-expression."

With greater exposure to and experience in her field of art history, and practice justifying her decision to others, Westwood explains her understanding of the legitimacy of her field:

I think that art has always been an important part of civilization; of society. It is part of what makes us human that we create these things that aren't entirely practical. [As a concentration], it can get a bad reputation and that's why I get these questions about, "What are we going to do with it?" But I think it's an incredibly unique and important way to be able to look at the world around us... especially in modern culture, we're so inundated with media and new forms of art, which has expanded to include so many things. I think being able to look at it critically and deconstruct it and see where it's coming from and what it's saying is a really important skill.

Despite their increasingly sophisticated explanations of the legitimacy of their work, participants describe the challenge of gaining traction in relation to more established

narratives of what constitutes legitimate academic pursuits. They believe that the arts are “under-represented” amongst the student population as concentrations, and “definitely under-rated.” On the one hand, the arts are seen as something that more “independent” students choose to study, which can often elicit admiration and respect from peers. On the other hand, students lament that others may view them as unambitious students who have chosen undemanding and “chill majors.” One student likens being a music concentrator at Harvard to someone pursuing English at MIT: “you’re just sort of the odd ball out.” He describes that it is hard for his peers to believe he is “just taking music” when he is in an institution that is conceivably more renowned in other academic realms. Additionally, students with less background in the arts describe feeling self-conscious when others assume that since they are concentrating in the arts, they must be “an amazing artist.” The perception that only students who are experienced and exceptionally talented in the visual arts or music pursue them as a concentration can be a point of confusion, even deterring some from considering the option in the first place.

Thus far I have established that the arts students in this study view their decision to pursue the arts as a risk. I have examined the logics behind this belief, showing the ways in which students must grapple with notions of academic legitimacy and the best use of their time at Harvard, their evolving conceptions of their field and justifications of legitimacy, and re-envisioning how they view their studies in relation to future work opportunities. In this next section, I examine specifically *how* students address the perceived gap between their studies and potential future careers in at least two ways: 1) by focusing on developing and fusing *substantive and technical* knowledge in a specialized area of interest in preparation for entering a competitive professional field, and 2) by being open to compromise, either exploring peripheral areas of work related to their specific area of interest *or* exploring new

and unknown avenues for future work that may or may not be related to their current studies. I discuss how these participants particularly draw on the philosophy of a liberal arts education in order to justify their decision to pursue the arts.

## **II. Pursuing the Arts in a Liberal Arts Context**

It is perhaps not surprising that the arts students in this study draw more upon some basic tenets of a liberal arts education as a way of justifying their decision to choose an alternative and “less practical” pathway through Harvard. Yet, it is worth mentioning that it is in part due to the unconventionality of their choice, and the ensuing internal and external sources of doubt, that these students ultimately engage in a more extensive process of academic exploration. Like the economics students, the majority of arts students also arrived with a strong sense of what they would likely study based on prior experience. But unlike the economics students who remained determined to follow through on their planned trajectories, these students explored alternatives to challenge their plan in order to figure out if a) it is what they truly want to do, and b) if they could justify their decision in the context of a “Harvard education.”

Ken arrived at Harvard with extensive music training and though music was the likely path for him, he was concerned about limiting himself too soon before he had a chance to explore his other potential interests. Like his peers in this study, Ken wondered whether remaining heavily involved in music performance through co-curricular activities, rather than through his academics, would sufficiently satisfy his interests. Ken describes, “I got here, and I was considering not getting really involved in music at first...so when I first started thinking about what I was going to major in or concentrate in, I was thinking, “Oh, I

could possibly do something in the sciences and go to med school or do some teaching.”

The rationale behind this, he explains, is as follows:

So, part of the thinking was that it was Harvard and that I should be doing something, you know, rigorous and academic, even though music is rigorous and academic here. But I had to do something "real" that has job application, or something like that. You know, I'm going to Harvard, I can't study music.

Though he did not end up exploring the sciences, Ken selected a range of courses in his freshman year, including linguistics, which he was trying out as a possible concentration. Taking the course, he realized that studying linguistics is not something he would be happy doing. Despite the many ideas for alternatives he had in mind, he realized that “music is really what drives” him. According to Ken, Harvard’s music program is known to emphasize theory over performance. The focus on theory makes him feel that his choice is somewhat more legitimate since music is “treated as an academic subject as opposed to, a sort of career-oriented subject, because Harvard really doesn’t do that... everything is liberal arts-based as opposed to career-based.” In other words, making the decision to pursue music was easier for Ken in a liberal arts context.

For about a third of the arts students in the study, choosing to pursue the arts in a liberal arts setting rather than a professional training program was intentional. We have already read about Kayla’s decision to remain at Harvard rather than transferring to NYU’s Tisch School for the Arts, and Adele’s decision to apply to liberal arts colleges over the Rhode Island School of Design. Several international students, including Anna who was contemplating professional training in architecture through engineering school in her home country, and Kathe, a professional singer who was also considering conservatory training – both opted instead to pursue their interests in the arts in a liberal arts context instead.

In particular, the music students, the majority of whom are qualified for programs at Music Conservatories or professional schools like the Berklee College of Music, talk about

valuing the opportunity to broaden their experiences while also pursuing music: a liberal arts curriculum allows them such flexibility. Kathe, an accomplished vocalist from the U.K., intends to pursue a career as a professional singer after her time at Harvard. Though she considered applying directly to music conservatories for her undergraduate training, she ultimately decided to come to Harvard instead because she believed studying music within the context of a liberal arts curriculum would give her more freedom. However, she soon began to realize once she was here that pursuing interests other than music would not preclude her from applying to conservatory programs in the future. Kathe intentionally separates her studies from her career objectives. The opportunity to separate the two is why Harvard appealed to her, and is also the reason for why she felt the process of choosing a concentration was a challenging experience. She explains, “my concentration choice has no effect whatsoever on my career. It's just what I'm interested in doing and what I'm interested in doing with this kind of privileged time of four years in a very good research institution.” As an accomplished musician, Kathe took advantage of being in a liberal arts setting to explore interests beyond the arts, whereas others used it as a gateway to explore art more seriously than they may have otherwise.

Richard discovered his aptitude for music theory and composition after arriving at Harvard. As a freshman, he knew he wanted to pursue the humanities and thought he might choose History and Literature as a concentration. Richard was a strong student in language and literature in high school, taking AP classes in both subjects and participating in “Quiz Bowl” for literature. Given his known strengths, Richard found History and Literature at Harvard appealing because it taught him how to “look at Literature in a certain context” and “look at history in a more interesting way.” This approach, he explains, involves “not just like: ‘these are the facts and this is what happened,’ but, ‘how were people experiencing

that?’ as opposed to studying just Literature or English.”

Despite his enduring interest in literature, Richard was drawn to many of the classes offered by the music department. With an extensive background in choral music performance, Richard was excited about the opportunity to learn more music theory. He describes, “in the end, I've decided that I'm more interested in Music.” He believes strongly that the best way to invest in his four years at Harvard is to pursue something that he enjoys, even if he doesn’t have “definite plans for the future.” Once he made the commitment to focus his studies on music, he contemplated whether Harvard was still the right place for him to be:

If I had discovered my interest in Music earlier, would I have considered going to say Berklee or somewhere like that? And I guess, I don't think I regret coming to Harvard because I still think that even though I like studying Music, I want a liberal arts education...that's really important to me and I feel that's something that would be lacking at those other schools. But I've definitely thought about it.

Richard continues to explain how he values being able to pursue music while also taking classes in computer science and Spanish, and meeting a diverse group of students with varying academic interests, in comparison to meeting only musicians at music school. He ultimately believes it is a benefit to pursue music in a liberal arts context.

Several of the music concentrators in my study plan to carry out joint concentrations, reflecting their interest in maintaining their focus in music while gaining knowledge in another area. Sarah, an award-winning composer, decided on a joint concentration between History of Art and Architecture and Music. She explains that it was important for her to explore another field in order to push herself outside the boundaries of music and challenge herself while she was at college. Already accomplished as a musician, she specifically chose the design track in the new Architecture program within HAA because she wanted the challenge of learning how to create in a different medium. Additionally, she admits that she

is self-conscious about the fact that music may not be perceived as the most respected academic endeavor; she believes that pursuing a joint concentration helps enhance the legitimacy of her program while at Harvard.

### **Developing Substantive and Technical Knowledge**

The arts students anticipate they may have a challenging time searching for jobs related to their fields. One way in which they cope with this uncertainty is to ensure they are as well prepared as possible – technically *and* substantively – in their field of interest.

Participants describe thinking about the ways in which they might combine their courses and concentrations toward developing a specific substantive focus or body of knowledge in their field of study. While grounded in their main areas of interest related to their concentration – such as music composition, performance, architecture, or filmmaking - they explored a variety of courses in other disciplines that would help them develop a more complex understanding of their fields.

Anna exemplifies the ways in which students make connections across courses they are taking in various disciplines to inform their central interest. An international student from the Middle East, Anna debated between attending university in the U.K. or the U.S. and ultimately chose to come to Harvard with the goal of pursuing architecture as a future profession. She explains her deliberate decision to come to Harvard for a liberal arts education rather than attending a professional program in architecture in her home country or in the U.K., where she could have been certified in three years.

Whereas the former options would have been rooted in engineering departments, Anna explains deliberately seeking out a more “artistic” perspective on architecture through the liberal arts. Though she had plenty of experience in physics and math, two subjects she

excelled at in high school, Anna wanted the opportunity to explore studio courses and art history courses in order to learn more about aesthetics and design.

At Harvard, Anna was relieved that she did not have to choose between studies in Architecture and History of Art, since they are in the same department. The departmental pairing of these two areas of study is a key difference in how the program is structured compared to the engineering-based programs she had previously considered. Concerned at first, however, about a lack of professional experience in the Harvard curriculum, particularly since she started her studies before the architecture design track was an option, Anna cross-registered at MIT for an introductory drafting course in her freshman year. Just like the economics students who cross register to MIT for the accounting skills course, Anna felt it was necessary to round out her Harvard experience with a more technical course that would help build her skills. However, as she became more comfortable with the idea of a liberal arts education, she began to think less strictly about her undergraduate studies as defining her professional future. She explains, “for Architecture, it doesn't matter if you're taking Architecture as an undergrad or not. A lot of people come from different backgrounds and so I think that made it easier for me to choose my concentration.”

While she is excited about her direction, she was also wary at first of leaving behind math and science entirely, since it was such a major part of her high school experience. To be certain, she ended up taking a course in each, which confirmed her decision to move away from them. Anna highlights the challenge of this process of elimination and how she weighed the consequences:

It's about making a decision. It's about not being afraid that you're doing the wrong decision, basically. So I think the opportunity cost of choosing one concentration and not the other is the hardest part. The hardest part is also trying to plan for your future. So like History of Art and Architecture is not considered to be a very practical degree like I mean... I don't know, Economics or Government.



Despite these occasional doubts echoing the now familiar narrative that participants in this study share, Anna keenly describes the courses she has taken so far in her first two years at Harvard and the ways in which they build on and expand her interest in architecture. In her art history courses, Anna describes developing observational and interpretive skills for analyzing the aesthetic and physical composition of artwork and buildings. These courses also inspired her to take courses in archeology in order to understand more about architectural excavation and preservation. She views her VES studio courses as helping her develop skills for manipulating materials and turning her ideas into physical form. Additionally, Anna elected to take a General Education course on natural disasters, which relates back to her interest in construction and preservation of buildings. She also views her math and physics courses as integral to maintaining a basic level of knowledge that will help her advance in her field.

Amongst the courses she explored, Anna was particularly drawn to social anthropology and after initially wondering whether she should in fact switch over entirely, she is considering pursuing it as a joint concentration

I'm so passionate about it that...sometimes I'm wondering if I should be doing purely Architecture or not...because my interest in Social Anthropology changed the way I want to practice Architecture: I want to practice it from more of a restoration and preservation side so I can talk about culture throughout that process. So, it really influenced the way I think about Architecture, the way I think about myself, and it's something that I'm constantly talking about with other people.

Though she does not believe she will actually switch, her new-found interest sparked an even more specific focus for Anna, who is now also exploring a curatorial perspective as part of her studies in architecture.

Through Social Anthropology, Anna describes learning the value of hearing other people's stories at a time when "the world is kind of lacking certain empathy, and I feel like you can find it in that discipline." She discovered an important distinction between the

disciplinary lens of art history in comparison to social anthropology, where the latter is “more about hearing other people's story than putting your own interpretation on that story.” In addition to being intrinsically drawn to this way of knowing, Anna believes gaining this perspective will make her a better architect if she chooses to stay on this professional path.

As she continues to pursue courses in history of art, archeology, and anthropology in tandem with her architecture courses, Anna describes how these experiences contribute to her evolving curatorial philosophy. Specifically, she talks about taking a course in Art and Archaeology that helped her “figure out her stance” on collecting objects. She describes how the course, which drew extensively from the collections at the Peabody Museum, led her to critically question the politics around what it means to “present a culture” by taking a “bird’s eye view on objects.” She observes that the traditional modes of displaying and viewing objects places the visitor in a passive, disengaged position that is “very distant from the culture itself.” This exhibition strategy was in extreme contrast to her studies in anthropology, where she has learned the importance of context and learning through lived experience and employing research methods such as ethnography. She describes, “When it comes to Anthropology, the way you do field work, and the way that you're there - It's like the idea of being there is now very important...and I don't think that's translated into museums.” By looking for critical connections between these disciplines to inform her own perspectives, she is beginning to develop an analytic and informed critique of traditional curatorial practices:

I think that we're still looking at objects from a very distant, far away point. I have trouble with how they talk about objects at the Peabody Museum... they usually use the words "rare" or "treasures" of the Peabody Museum, or all of these things that kind of guide the perception of the visitor, who doesn't really know about the object, to see it in a certain way.

She further comments on how the didactic labels and supporting information can often overshadow the objects themselves, so much so that visitors “don't even need to see the object in order to understand its value. Which is... I mean in a visual culture, it's kind of really problematic that you don't even need to see the object itself.”

Anna is then able to propose alternative, innovative approaches to this dilemma of collecting and displaying by drawing on her knowledge from across her courses. She suggests the possibility of integrating elements of performance art to enliven how objects are presented to the public, and changing the way visitors can engage with the material. She imagines how museums might use simulations and create labels that contain instructions rather than didactic information, where the viewer could try using the object (either physically or virtually) in the same way it was used originally. She believes such an approach could emphasize the importance of the object in context: “it's important because of its story, which is exactly what Anthropology, and the idea of Ethnography is supposed to be.” For Anna, having the opportunity to draw on the museums at Harvard as sites for applying the ideas she was learning in her courses was crucial.

Just as Anna synthesizes ideas from her courses in order to look for innovative approaches that could inform a potential future career as a curator, she is also becoming more open to exploring various approaches to her architectural practice. Whereas her previous focus was on acquiring and perfecting the skills of the trade, she now speaks about developing her concepts and skills in tandem where one will influence the other as she now believes “the idea of iteration is really important in architecture.” She describes previously approaching her work as “a perfectionist, or someone who doesn't want to make any mistakes.” As an example, in design studio, every time she was unhappy with the result, she would take her model apart. Now, she has learned to be more comfortable working to

stretch her own limitations to allow herself more freedom to experiment and discover the potential of the physical material she is working with. She recognizes how an improved understanding of the properties of a material through experimentation can also improve her conceptual designs: “You need your idea, but at the same time you need the material to also guide you through that process. It's very important, and the fact is - you need to make things in order to move forward, which is something that I didn't realize last year because I took apart so much of what I did.”

In our final interview, Anna seems content with her decision to concentrate in History of Art and Architecture. She still wonders to what extent she needs to be “intuitively good” at architecture and design versus it being something she can learn and develop over time. She remains flexible about her future career and emphasizes that her priority is learning and engagement in her studies:

Enjoying my concentration is most important thing...I mean, when it comes to having a practical degree, I'm probably the only person that feels like any degree can be a practical degree because I don't think you can succeed if you don't know what you do. And at the same time, I mean, it's not necessary to go into the field of work that you studied...So my concern is enjoying it and being successful at it, not in terms of work, but in terms of academics basically...So, these are the two pressures: being good at what I'm doing and enjoying it at the same time. Practical pressure is not that important.

In her rationale, Anna re-conceptualizes both the shared understanding amongst students about the relationship between academic study and future work, as well as her own pre-conceptions. She questions a narrow definition of “practicality” and introduces other criteria for current and future success and engagement in one’s work, including the notion of substantive knowledge: “know[ing] what you do” through intellectual inquiry, in addition to technical knowledge. She raises a crucial question about many students’ limited conceptualizations about what is considered a useful or practical pursuit. In particular, she highlights some of the arbitrariness of the ways in which many students have separated

pursuits that are considered practical from those that are driven by interest and engagement. While the economics students talk about working hard in the present, even if it is to the detriment of their interest and enjoyment for future happiness, the arts students talk about having a hard time thinking about art as an academic and legitimate area of study because it does not feel like work; it is something that they enjoy. These perspectives raise an important question of why students have this remarkably firm idea about the separation of work from enjoyment. Even though Anna does not subscribe to the mainstream belief that economics is “the most stable concentration” at Harvard, it is a narrative that she – and the other arts students - must grapple with constantly in justifying their decisions to themselves and to others for why they are pursuing the arts.

Seeking out technical training is a clear challenge in a liberal arts context, as we have already seen with Anna, who arrived before the new architecture studies track in partnership with the Graduate School of Design track was implemented in the History of Art and Architecture department. Anna’s solution was to cross-register for a studio course at MIT. Kayla, the aspiring filmmaker who we met in Chapter 4, seriously considered whether she should transfer to NYU’s Tisch School for the Arts. Ultimately, Kayla decided to remain at Harvard and make the most of the opportunities and resources available to her here.

Though Kayla was concerned at first about how she would acquire the technical skills related to film-making in order to be competitive in her field, she has since found informal ways to build this knowledge. For example, she has made a special effort to work as a crew member on the film projects of her peers in order to gain experience. She recounts what she was told by the department when she first expressed her concerns:

We're not a film school, we are here for teaching people how to be authorial. We want you to be able to create your works and create a vision, and the technical aspects will come. Film is inherently collaborative and so there will be someone when you begin to make your films to do your lighting and to do your sound work.

Skeptical at first, Kayla gradually embraced this approach. While learning as much as possible about the technical aspects of her craft outside of the classroom, she began to focus on developing her vision: her substantive knowledge and authorial voice as a director through her coursework and her film projects.

An experienced actress and singer, making the switch to the other side of the lens, from performer to director, was a conscious decision for Kayla, who describes “wanting to have more power” if she pursues a direction in the arts. She reasons, “If I’m going to go into the arts and the creative side, it’s not really a guaranteed career path.” She feels the least she can do is be well versed in all aspects of filmmaking and be in the position of creative control. Kayla also believes she will be able to make more of a difference in people’s lives in this role: “You impact people as a director because everything you put on screen is your choice ...and so, it’s really about making statements.” She describes the universal appeal of Hollywood movies, and the opportunity to influence the norms and tastes of the general public from a social justice lens. She believes that movies are one medium through which people “remember their lives, and remember huge moments they see on screen” that can bring them back to an important moment, idea, or experience.

Kayla talks about her aspiration to shift the norms of representation of people and identity in the mainstream media, and relates this to her own sense of identity as a biracial person. She explains, “I’ve had this idea and I don’t know how I’d bring it to fruition, but being biracial, it is really important to me that people see and become accustomed to interracial dating.” One of her goals, therefore, would be to include storylines involving romantic relationships between people from different backgrounds, because she believes “it is important for people to see a non-euro-centric view of things.” She is interested in bringing this lens to movies around significant events in history as well: “We always see the

period pieces with colored servants, or you see the Native Americans dancing around the fire, and those are things that are touchy subjects,” but, she wonders, how did these events feel from the perspective of those characters? Providing these often overlooked perspectives is something that Kayla is passionate to pursue, and she aims to be in a position where she will have some “control over what people see, and what they’re exposed to, and what becomes normal.”

To achieve her goals, Kayla, like the others, plans to draw on Harvard’s resources. She hopes to take full advantage of “Harvardwood,” an online network of alumni working in the arts and entertainment that posts job and internship opportunities. Given that so few students at Harvard hold the same aspirations as she does, her hope is to stand out within this smaller community before launching into the entertainment industry. She calls it a “stepladder approach” where she gradually acclimatizes to being away from home as a “small-town girl” from the South, first at Harvard, and then into “the heart of entertainment” in L.A.

Kayla’s drive to pursue fiction filmmaking has not been without challenges. Having developed a substantive interest in this medium of story-telling, she describes a sense of divide between her department’s interest in independent, documentary style filmmaking and her interest in fiction film (aka Hollywood movies), which is often perceived as too mainstream and clichéd. She recounts that in casual conversations, there is “not a lot of reverence for Hollywood” and quite often “a lot of anti-blockbuster jokes that are made.” This sentiment carries a message that Kayla hears as “If you’re here for making movies based on formulaic Hollywood clichés, then this may not be the place for you.”

Despite these challenges, Kayla persists in her vision to make fiction movies, believing that for some people, “Hollywood is very endearing and the clichés are not really

cliché, but more of things that are consistencies, that people can rely on for having a movie-going experience...sometimes, the abstract artsy-fartsy stuff is alienating, and can seem sort of pretentious.” Kayla would like to harness the power of popular films to effect change in the world through storytelling. She distances herself from the more rigid constraints of what it means to be an artist or to produce fine art, further emphasizing her goal to make a big impact through popular media:

I almost don't want to say it aloud. The thing that I've learned about myself is, that I have a passion for film making, not because of it's artistic innovations, or what I can learn as an artist, or how I can grow in that regard, but more so the act of sharing visceral images and experiences with other people...I am always thinking, can someone relate to this?

While Kayla remains steadfast in her goals, by the end of the year, she has also learned the benefits of documentary film as a tool for storytelling. She describes her growing appreciation for the challenges and opportunities of this form of filmmaking, that relies much more on what the camera can draw out of the people and environment that can't necessarily be anticipated. She explains learning how

the camera almost brings out something in people that's either really endearing or really alarming. And to meet people who live so differently from me, and who are not defined by the things that they tell me; Like, you can tell me, "I'm a smart this, I'm a great this." But if all I can see on camera is you being a buffoon, then, that speaks for itself. And so, I think that's something I couldn't get from fiction film making, because I would be fabricating everything.

In making documentaries, Kayla has learned to hone her vision in order to observe and capture the world as she sees it, which she believes has made her a more open and non-judgmental person. She describes the difference between imposing meaning, as one might do in making a fiction film, versus searching for meaning in documentary: “Once you start imposing meaning on everything, you don't see; you see what you want to see, you see what you're told to see, and to sort of unlearn that through documentary, is interesting.”

Kayla believes the measure of her work as a future filmmaker will be whether people



will want to watch her movies, be able to relate to them, and quote the words she writes. She says she values these outcomes far more than being cutting edge artistically. Though Kayla aspires to becoming an artist, she feels she does not yet have enough knowledge to claim this identity. Moreover, she believes it is a title that will be conferred to her by outsiders, rather than something she establishes herself. Ultimately, however, she values the relational aspect of filmmaking over artistic innovation.

Anna's substantive knowledge came from combining her experiences across courses to inform her future work as an architect and curator. In contrast, Kayla's came from her willingness to immerse herself in her program, even though she was reluctant at first given its focus on documentary and authorship over fiction film and technical training. Both students had to reconcile their concern about a lack of technical training, while looking for creative ways to meet this need and searching for meaningful connections between the content of their courses and their core interests in architecture and film-making.

### **Anticipating Alternative Career Options**

Not all of the arts students describe developing a substantive focus for their work that they hope to carry forward into the future. Several students search for a compromise – ways of applying their skills in peripheral areas of work. Others consider working in fields they see as entirely unrelated to their studies.

Some students actively reject becoming an artist as a professional goal. Angela, a VES concentrator, aspires to work in marketing and advertising, and believes her arts training will serve her well in the industry. On why she does not see herself becoming a professional artist, she explains, “I know that it's not the most promising career choice and ... I like art, but I don't think I will be able to just sit down and have that as my living. I do

enjoy it and I think I'll get a lot out of it, but I don't think I'll be a practicing artist.” Instead, she sees herself “maybe starting off at a firm, or maybe having a different career for a couple of years” before perhaps returning for grad school for graphic design or architecture. She does not see herself becoming a “straight-up artist.” Surprisingly, when asked to identify an anti-mentor (the opposite of mentor, someone she would not want to emulate in any way), she refers to one of her VES instructors who is also a professional artist. “I don’t have any feelings against my professor,” she explains, but “I know that I don't want to be an artist-artist, because I think that's a lot of risk...I don't think I necessarily want to try to find my own name and go through all the uncertainty.” It becomes clear in our conversation that Angela’s main concern is financial risk.

Besides having to grapple with a constant feeling of financial uncertainty about the future, Angela often feels mired by the expectation that she be able to couch her artwork in theory and/or didactic. She is puzzled by the need for analyses and discussion over meaning, which can feel inaccessible and irrelevant at times. Instead, she prefers to focus on the aesthetic appreciation of patterns. She is reluctant to have to over-explain her work through written statements: “I just make it, and there's not really anything deep to it, because it's really very 2D...So, I guess in the end, I really want people to kind of appreciate it as a visual; as it is.”

Angela says her goal is to establish a corporate career, and she has picked advertising as a possible focus, even though she admits she has little knowledge and possibly a skewed perspective of what this will involve: “I think I have an illusion or kind of a fantasy about what the advertising world is like, and that's why I really want to do an internship before I graduate.” An internship would expose her to the reality of on the ground experience. She admits that her impressions of the advertising industry are based on what she’s seen on TV,

on shows such as *Mad Men*, and from her psychology classes, where she has learned how advertising can influence peoples' opinions. She suspects it is a much more glorified line of work than what actually happens and anticipates a competitive, "cut-throat" environment.

Ultimately, she admits, her parents' influence plays a role in her notion that advertising might be a fruitful path to pursue. Angela's parents were originally against her decision to pursue VES, because they did not think it was "the best way to take advantage of Harvard." She explains their belief that the most "renowned" subjects at Harvard are Economics and Government, and they had hoped she would choose on of these more reputable concentrations. Though Angela maintained her choice of VES, her rationale for going in to advertising in an attempt to bridge her own interests and her parents expectations: "I think advertising is somewhere in between Economics - like finance...to something that requires a creative field. So, I think it's a good combination, a good balance." Since she was never really considering becoming a professional artist in the first place, she does not believe that this decision "strays too far" from her genuine interests and goals. Angela would ultimately like to make enough of a living in order to support herself while also pursuing something that she is passionate it about.

For several students, the compromise between making a living and pursuing their passion is a central issue. For Richard, deciding to study music was already a big risk; "deciding to go into professional performance would be a whole other step toward poverty." Though he loves the feeling of being on stage in front of an audience and would be happy to perform for a living, he views this path as adding an additional layer of risk to an already uncertain direction. Richard explains, "there are a lot of jobs in Music but there aren't necessarily a lot of good paying jobs in performance. There are a lot of people trying to make it who aren't." As an alternative, Richard is thinking about going to graduate school to

study music theory or composition. He can picture himself becoming a professor, which he sees as providing a more stable career path. He is also starting to learn more about sound production through his involvement in the student sound studio on campus, and foresees possible career options as a sound professional.

Financial concerns are also a factor for Kathe, who is already fairly accomplished as a professional singer. We have already read about how she chose to study History and Literature rather than music. By the end of the academic year, she is seriously questioning whether she would even like to continue pursuing a career in performance post-college graduation:

My parents still really want me to do music even if I end up penniless. I don't want to end up penniless though, I'm sorry...I have friends who are saying jokingly, "Oh, we're resigning to be a penniless musician." I'm not. Nothing destroys the spirit like poverty. It's a quote that's haunted many artists for many hundreds of years... I also don't want to condemn myself to a life of drudgery.

She recounts advice from her parents, who tell her, "Kathe, no one's getting a job. You might just well go and be unemployed and pursue something you enjoy rather than something you don't enjoy." While she takes her parents' point of view into consideration, she is uncompromising about wanting a stable income in the future. Furthermore, she notes that the atmosphere at Harvard is "very much against" the approach of setting practicality aside to pursue something for pure enjoyment. Her parents, she notes, are "continually dismayed that they seem to have raised a realist."

Additionally, Kathe describes that her true passion is not necessarily for music itself, but for performance. For her, this realization means securing the right kind of performing opportunities because she would not be satisfied just "sitting in a practice room, practicing," waiting for the right gig. Furthermore, she notes, "I identify so much as a performer and I love performing so much, which is why I want to do it. But...there are a lot of aspects of the

lifestyle that I don't like.” Kathe describes her recent involvement in a student-produced opera on campus as illuminating because it gave her that chance to speak with professional singers who are at the start of building their careers. She realizes that most of them had to take on several random jobs in order to “support the small amount of music they are able to do,” and also notes how extremely competitive it is in her field:

Everything is extremely competitive. But singing is particularly competitive. I know I can do it but I just don't know if I want to. And I think there's one thing to be said for doing what you love, but if your spirit is going to be crushed by horrible work hours or poverty or something like that, then that's not worth it for me.

For Kathe, the prospect of reaching the end of a challenging career feeling unhappy because of financial hardship is not worth it. She does not want to “jump naively” into music without thinking seriously about the very real repercussions of not having enough money to support herself: “I know how hard it’s going to be and I don't want it so.” Kathe has recently gotten a glimpse into opportunities in the corporate world after meeting Bob Kraft, the CEO of Fox Music, at a networking event. She was intrigued by his job and though she is not sure she would enjoy the process of climbing the corporate ladder, she reasons “the way to any job is not very fun.” Ultimately, she wonders if it’s possible to “keep performing and making money,” yet she assumes she will have to sacrifice one or the other at some point. She is just not sure which one it is going to be yet.

In order to broaden her options, Kathe is also actively looking for opportunities outside of music that might appeal to her as a possible career path. She is considering the possibility of doing NGO work after she graduates and has secured a related summer internship in order to gain some experience with this type of work. She will be going to Tanzania to teach local villagers about AIDS and HIV prevention. She also hopes she will be able to facilitate some music workshops while she is there, but is uncertain about whether this will be possible.

By the end of the year, Kathe describes gaining some more nuanced perspectives about how she might integrate her interest in music and performance into various realms of work. Whereas before, she conceived of her choice as either “do I want to sing or do I want to do something random that that's entirely different,” she now thinks “do I want to perform, or do I want to go on the business side of music, or do I want to do, like music in community and NGO stuff?” She describes realizing that deciding against pursuing performance does not preclude her from integrating music into her future work in different ways. Combining her interest with her growing awareness of NGO work, she has come to understand that art and music can have a social impact on a global scale. She describes a growing substantive interest in the role of art and social change, which brings her back to some of the original reasons she was interested in music in the first place: “I'm really interested in Music as a tool for populism and just, generally, how music and culture and history intersect.”

Just as they explored alternatives before committing to their concentrations, some of the arts students also approach ideas about their future work with a similar strategy. Kathe wants to broaden her options by looking at NGO work because she does not think performance is a viable path. For her part, Westwood is intentionally looking for diverse opportunities because she does not want to blindly pursue a typical art history path without ever having considered something different. Part of her motivation is to demonstrate to herself that if she pursues graduate studies in art history, she is doing it because she wants to, not because she has to. When thinking about what kind of experience she wants to gain over the coming summer, she describes originally aiming to secure a museum internship in New York because “I'm an Art History major and that's what Art History majors do.” However, in the process of applying, she started to feel “oddly claustrophobic about the

idea” because she felt as if she was just “following in some sort of set path” of what she was “supposed to be doing.” Though she maintains she loves studying art history and would likely enjoy working in a museum, another part of her craves seeking out experiences that are more out of the ordinary. She explains,

To work in a museum, it would be essentially all Art History students from New York or Boston. They're mainly all Northeastern kids who are going to liberal arts schools. And I really just wanted to do something different and I felt like this is one of the last summers where I could just go somewhere totally random and do something that sounded fun that I knew nothing about.

Changing her strategy, Westwood began reaching out to different people who she “thought had interesting jobs” including the film department at the South by Southwest film festival, the founder of the FBI Organizational Crimes Division, and New York Public Radio. Due to her ingenuity and making use of her connections, Westwood was able to create an internship for herself at the film festival, which will bring her to Austin for the summer. She is excited by the prospect of being involved in a new position that can evolve to match her interests, rather than a more well-established and “regimented” museum internship that she feels would be less self-directed and more focused on menial work.

Westwood’s shift in strategy for how she would like to approach her summers reflects her determination to make the most of current opportunities and avoid unnecessarily limiting herself by what others might define as a practical or sensible path. She is also determined to take a few years after she graduates from college in order to explore her options and has tried not to worry too much about her future career. While many of her family and friends questioned her decision to study art history instead of something more ‘practical’, Westwood describes: “I was pleasantly surprised to find that it really didn't phase me that so many people thought it was a bad idea.” At the same time, she finds it daunting to think about future work opportunities, in large part because of the financial uncertainty:

I don't know, it's something I kind of realized that if I do anything that naturally follows from my majors, I'm not going to get a huge salary which is so fine with me but I also don't know that I'm going to work in a museum or become a teacher or become something like that which would be the more direct career paths from what I'm studying. I don't know. It's so scary to think about jobs.

Westwood describes watching her friends graduate, some who are “making really great salaries” but doing things she would “really hate to do.” She is unwilling to take a job just for the salary, but at the same time, she hopes she will be able to find a job that she enjoys and can also make living with. In particular, she is guided by wanting to make sure she can afford to live in a major city center with a vibrant arts scene, such as San Francisco, a locale she sees as essential for maximizing job opportunities related to her field. While Westwood is passionate about her field and interested in pursuing it as a possible career path, she also remains open to the unexpected and allows her curiosity to guide her. She is ultimately puzzled by those who criticize her choice, but also must grapple with the broad narrative of “what Harvard students do” and her decision to go against the grain.

Whereas the economics students in this study shared the goal of working in business at some point in their careers, the arts students have more varied future goals. These goals range from pursuing careers closely tied to their studies to pursuing something completely unrelated. Like the economics students, the arts students leverage the resources and networks available to them through Harvard; but these resources and networks are less streamlined primarily because of a lack of recruiting process at the scale and visibility as the ones for consulting and finance. Students therefore must design their trajectories more independently and deliberately seek out how, if at all, they want to connect their studies to their future work. Interestingly, all five History of Art and Architecture students are considering careers in fields related to their studies; all five VES students are considering options in commercial design and film-making, but do not aim to become artists



professionally; and all four music students are hopeful for future careers as composers and/or performers. However, some are at the same time also exploring options that are not connected to their studies in order to expand their options.

One striking variation between how the arts students talk about future work, in contrast to the economics students, is the extent to which they consider the substantive features of potential jobs. For example, most economics students had no response when I asked them what areas or issues they would want to apply their business skills to address. The exceptions were Redwood, who is developing a strong focus on the energy industry; Jessika, who is developing a start up in the media industry; and Justin and Louis who are both interested in public policy and serving their local communities. Whereas the majority of economics students' rationales focused heavily on skill-building and the logistical details of certain job opportunities (work hours, travel opportunities, human interaction), the arts students talked more about discovering content that they would later look to address in their work.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that participants who choose to concentrate in the arts at Harvard frame their decision as a risk because they are choosing a path that diverges from the shared narrative of "what Harvard students do." As a result, they believe they are risking the assurances of what is available to them as Harvard students, putting their sense of achievement, future careers, and future earning potential at stake. I outline the ways in which students manage this risk by reconstructing their sense of the future in relation to their academic studies, formulating more in-depth understandings of the academic and social legitimacy of their pursuits, and developing complex and deep substantive knowledge

about their fields of study. Furthermore, I show the ways in which students take advantage of a liberal arts context in order to justify the plurality of their pursuits, while remaining open to unanticipated academic and work interests.

Notably, while students rightly questioned the narrow and perhaps arbitrary definition of practicality delimited by an economic rationale, they also managed this aspect of ‘risk’ by being conservative about the idea of becoming artists. I was struck by how students’ conception of being an artist was synonymous with being inaccessible and somehow less socially or materially relevant. Instead, they opted to think about careers in commercial contexts such as filmmaking, music composition, or sound engineering in Hollywood, professional tracks such as architecture or graphic design, and corporate marketing and advertising. Choosing the arts, they reasoned, was risky enough – jeopardizing their future livelihood, even if the salary will be less than jobs in finance and consulting, would be too much of a risk.

As we have seen, the economics students draw on a discourse of practicality in their decision-making that involves the following elements: 1) a separation between practicality and happiness in their choice of study; 2) a technical rational view of education that privileges quantitative skills and ways of knowing as more practical; 3) pay range expectations that will be “decent” enough to live on comfortably and pursue hobbies and a certain lifestyle, and 4) a concern for prestige and elite status achieved through competition for particular work opportunities. Following this logic, the economics students in this study overwhelmingly set aside their current happiness and engagement, investing instead in the promise of future happiness through financial freedom. Contesting this logic, the arts students had to grapple with 1) valuing a sense of happiness and engagement in their learning as a valid basis for choosing a concentration, 2) justifying the legitimacy of their

learning in non-quantitative fields; 3) earning a decent living that they know will be less than their peers who opted for routes in finance and consulting, and 4) overcoming any concerns for prestige and elite status established by comparison or competition. Notably, a key difference between the economics and arts students in the study was that the arts students managed to disengage from the collective notion of “achievement” – which is likely a central component of what got them to Harvard in the first place. Instead they redefine for themselves individually, what matters to them about their studies and why they feel justified investing their time into a direction that appears to go against the “greater impulses” of the collective.

## **Chapter 7. Discussion and Conclusion**

In this study, I investigated how thirty-nine undergraduates at Harvard College made one of their first consequential, academic decisions in the context of a powerful cultural narrative about the economic purpose of college. By examining students' narratives about their academic decision-making, namely how they chose their concentrations, I sought to understand the underlying rationales behind their choices and relatedly, students' ideas about the purpose of their college education. In designing this study, I asked the following questions: How do undergraduate concentrators in the arts vs. economics at an elite Ivy League college explain their decision-making process in selecting a major? How do they talk about their fields of study in relation to their broader educational experience and future goals?

In this final chapter, I review my findings and discuss the most compelling and unexpected things I have learned from the participants in this study. I then discuss the implications of this work and suggest avenues for future research.

### **I. Review of Findings**

#### **The Decision-making process: Structure vs. Experience**

Through my analysis, I demonstrated that there is a misalignment between how Harvard as an institution structures the decision-making process for students and how students themselves experience the process. Whereas Harvard College provides students with a decision timeline and supports based on a trajectory of exploring, identifying, and narrowing interests, I found that the majority of participants in this study arrived at Harvard believing they already knew what they were going to concentrate in. Therefore, students described using this time of exploration mainly for fulfilling degree requirements.

Furthermore, I found that students' sense of belonging at Harvard during sophomore year - a period of transition and definition - was rooted more in familiarity with policies and procedures rather than in finding an "academic home" intellectually. The decision-making process is structured to move students toward increasingly focused exploration and to firm up their intellectual interests and identity. However, despite support provided by the College, the students in my study described feeling a *loss* of purpose around their studies, and consequently, a sense of alienation from the institution. Furthermore, I found they have few mentors and role models, and see their peers as main examples of anti-mentors.

### **A Shared Narrative of Group Identity: "What Harvard Students Do"**

After establishing the structural and experiential arc of the decision-making process from both an institutional perspective and the student perspective, I examined students' narratives of decision-making as individuals embedded within the context of Harvard. I demonstrated that a shared narrative of "what Harvard students do" was a central reference point amongst participants as they made decisions about their own educational trajectories through Harvard and their future goals. I examined the ways in which this narrative draws on an economic rationale and centers on a notion of achievement that is associated with participants' group identity as Harvard students.

### **Economics students and the Path of Least Resistance**

I demonstrated the pervasiveness of the narrative of "what Harvard students do" amongst students, which highlights the crucial role of context in shaping students' beliefs and actions. Despite their varied stances and attempts to distinguish themselves, the majority of economics students in this study named their future aspirations in business as the main

reason for choosing to study economics. Similarly, with varying levels of interest and enthusiasm, they also had plans to participate in the recruiting process for jobs in finance and consulting. I have shown the ways in which this trajectory was perceived as the path of least resistance by students. Despite their level of interest and/or ability, these students view economics as the most relevant in real-world application, as a substitute for a degree in business, and as a signal of competitive edge and prestige. I have also demonstrated the ways in which students purposefully limited their academic exploration in order to stay focused on an area of study they perceive as more legitimate than others.

### **Arts Students and Resisting the Larger Impulse**

I demonstrated that participants who chose to concentrate in the arts at Harvard framed their decision as a risk because they chose a path that diverges from the shared narrative of “what Harvard students do.” As a result, they risked the perceived assurances of what is available to them as Harvard students, putting their sense of achievement, future careers, and future earning potential at stake. I outlined the ways in which students manage this risk in three ways: 1) by reconstructing their sense of the future in relation to their academic studies, 2) by formulating more in-depth understandings of the academic and social legitimacy of their pursuits, and 3) by developing complex and deep substantive knowledge about their fields of study. Furthermore, I have demonstrated how students leverage being in a liberal arts context in order to justify the plurality of their pursuits, while remaining open to unanticipated academic and work interests.

Notably, while students rightly questioned the narrow and perhaps arbitrary definition of practicality delimited by an economic rationale, they also managed this aspect of ‘risk’ by being conservative about the idea of becoming artists. I was struck by how

students' conceptions of being an artist was synonymous with being inaccessible and somehow less socially or materially relevant. Accordingly, they opted to think about careers in commercial contexts such as filmmaking, music composition, or sound engineering in Hollywood, professional tracks such as architecture or graphic design, and corporate marketing and advertising. Choosing the arts, they reasoned, was risky enough – jeopardizing their future livelihood, even if the salary will be less than jobs in finance and consulting, would be too much of a risk.

### **Negotiating a Discourse of Practicality**

The economics students in this study draw on a discourse of practicality in their decision-making that involves the following elements: 1) a separation between practicality and happiness in their choice of study; 2) a technical rational view of education that privileges quantitative skills and ways of knowing as more practical; 3) pay range expectations that will be “decent” enough to live on comfortably and pursue hobbies and a certain lifestyle, and 4) a concern for prestige and elite status achieved through competition for particular work opportunities. Following this logic, by their own testimony, the economics students overwhelmingly set aside their current happiness and engagement, investing instead in the promise of future happiness through financial freedom.

Contesting this logic, the arts students had to grapple with 1) valuing a sense of happiness and engagement in their learning as a valid basis for choosing a concentration, 2) justifying the legitimacy of their learning in non-quantitative fields; 3) earning a decent living that they know will be less than their peers who opted for routes in finance and consulting, and 4) overcoming any concerns for prestige and elite status established by comparison or competition. Notably, a key difference between the economics and arts students in the study

was that the arts students managed to disengage from the collective notion of “achievement” – which is likely a central component of what got them to Harvard in the first place. Instead they redefine for themselves individually, what matters to them about their studies and why they feel justified investing their time into a direction that appears to go against the collective impulse.

## II. Discussion

### A Logic of Legitimacy

The extent to which the cultural narrative about the economic purpose of education has permeated students’ beliefs about what they are at Harvard to accomplish is striking. Though I cannot make claims about the entire student population, the fact that the shared narrative of “what Harvard students do” was so central and influential to the decision-making process of both economics and arts students in this study suggests it has a broader presence amongst undergraduates at this elite institution.

This finding is surprising because participants are amongst an extremely select group of high achieving students who have chosen to pursue a liberal arts education<sup>6</sup>. Yet, despite the effort and dedication required to gain admission, students themselves are not convinced that a liberal arts education is valuable, relevant, or in their best interest.

Arguably, these students are well-positioned to take advantage of liberal learning at its best. Yet the findings reveal that participants are pre-occupied with making up for what they believe is missing from their education, namely technical knowledge and vocational

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<sup>6</sup> Recent statistics show that of the 503,164 Bachelor’s degrees conferred by private nonprofit post-secondary institutions in 2009-2010, only 14,589 (just under 3%) were in the liberal arts and sciences, which is also grouped with General Studies and Humanities. In contrast, degrees in business, management, marketing, and related support services were the most popular, accounting for 115,576 degrees conferred (or 23%). The popularity of business reflects the national trend across post-secondary institutions, where business also ranks first as the most numerous of degrees conferred (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).



training. Whether cross-registering for accounting or drafting courses at MIT, avidly seeking out business knowledge and training through membership in co-curricular groups and internships, or volunteering as a crew member on various film projects, students perceive the need to gain professional skills in order to compete for jobs post-graduation.

The economics students in this study overwhelmingly believe that economics is a practical and natural choice because of its perceived ties to business and finance, and also because they believe it signifies to employers a basic level of quantitative ability, seriousness, and commitment to related fields of employment. They view economics as a pragmatic alternative to what they understand as “the true liberal arts” – namely, the Humanities – which they do not regard as a legitimate academic focus. At the same time, some admitted to admiring their peers in these areas for taking a risk and for their high level of engagement in their coursework.

The arts students in this study had to grapple with this same logic of legitimacy. Those who held these same beliefs had to re-formulate their ideas about academic legitimacy in order to pursue their decision with confidence. Those who did not hold these beliefs still had to contend with peers and adults who scrutinized their decision through a narrow lens of practicality, thus challenging a decision that students themselves already perceived as a risk. For some participants, the fear of the perceived impracticality of pursuing the arts at Harvard led them to consider whether they ought to transfer to more technically-based, professional training programs. Ultimately, these students drew on the basic tenets of a liberal arts education in order to justify what is perceived as an unconventional path through Harvard.

It is clear that anxiety over the perceived impracticality of pursuing the arts is deeply engrained in the educational ecology in which students are embedded. Even when students

are confident about their decision, they must grapple with an onslaught of external forces doubting their choice, forcing them to question their priorities. Such social-regulation by concerned adults and peers is further evidence that an economic rationale has a rule-like status in the context of Harvard.

By contrast, the economic students do not describe having to justify their choice to others to nearly the same extent. The students who commit to pursuing the arts despite any self or external doubt ultimately make more considered decisions as a result of exploring their options and scrutinizing their motivations. Often, this exploration is motivated not by intellectual curiosity, but by fear and the need to justify their actions to many skeptics. The economics students, however, are less pressed to examine their choices critically. They must rely on-self motivation or a rare voice of dissent as an impetus to question their choices.

Possible avenues for future research include expanding the scope of this study to include more students across all academic divisions to confirm if they indeed share a common understanding of “what Harvard students do,” and how they navigate this narrative in their own decision-making. In choosing to focus on students in economics and the arts (VES in particular), I inadvertently chose subject areas that students might “calculate” as “likely to bring a return on educational investment” given their perceived connection to the new economy (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p.1). Business, communication, and media arts are three such majors, and it is evident that participants in my study associated economics with business, and visual and environmental studies in particular with media arts. Thus, it is possible that the instrumental outcomes of education were more salient to students in both of these groups. Expanding this study to include other subjects in the humanities in particular would illuminate the extent to which this narrative of practicality persists across students in various areas of study.

In addition to broadening the participant base, deepening the research by conducting ethnographic study amongst a selection of students in their freshman and sophomore years would illuminate in greater detail the contextual features of Harvard and the ways in which they interact with students' conceptions of academic purpose and legitimacy. Close study would make it possible to observe and document whether students' perspectives shift over time, and if so, how various factors influence this process. Particular attention to students' advising relationships and interaction with faculty would be informative, given that participants reported a lack of mentors in this arena. I would also propose examining the distinction between students' perceptions of achievement compared to success. In this study, I realized that these are two distinct but related goals amongst students. I chose to focus on achievement as it was the more relevant concept to participants' decision making. Participants viewed achievement as instrumental and related to external measures of their worth and qualifications. In comparison, they offered different measures for their ultimate future success, including happiness and engagement in their work— elements they were willing to forgo in their academics.

Furthermore, research comparing students' conceptions of liberal arts education and academic decision-making at Harvard with students at other elite colleges embedded within large research universities would be instructive. A comparison would offer insight into whether students at these types of elite colleges hold similar or different views about practicality and prestige relating to certain areas of study and future work opportunities, and the mediating role of a particular school's culture and context. Additionally, a comparison between students' conceptions of a liberal arts education in Ivy League colleges versus small residential liberal arts colleges could highlight significant institutional features that impact students' worldviews.

### **Achievement Culture and Identity**

The findings in this study demonstrate a particular notion of achievement associated with the group identity of Harvard students, which is captured by the narrative of “what Harvard students do.” This narrative is grounded in an economic rationale and a particular discourse of practicality. Strikingly, participants’ narratives illuminate the ways in which choosing a concentration is about much more than deciding on an area of study. In fact, it is a choice about whether students, as individuals, will continue to identify with the kind of “achievement culture” they have been socialized into since high school. A central mechanism for this socialization is participation in the elite admissions process itself.

Participants highlighted the challenge of transitioning from high school to college, specifically with reference to shifts in pedagogies of teaching and learning. They discussed realizing that studying by rote memorization was no longer sufficient, and the challenge of adjusting to new ways of learning and applying knowledge. At college, many students experienced for the first time the necessity to investigate, even if implicitly, their identities as learners. Participants were well versed in describing what they had learned in terms of mobilizing resources and networks at Harvard. However, they were less able to explain the content and rationale behind their academic pursuits. A central and continuing challenge for students, therefore, is determining their values and beliefs as learners, and as students at Harvard, and navigating how these identities will inform their academic decision-making. This involves examining the values and beliefs they bring with them to college – from the processes of socialization through family and schooling – as well as a more explicit and critical understanding of the underlying rationale encountered at Harvard about what they “ought” to do as Harvard students.

*High School and Admissions Burnout*

Participants described “sophomore slump” as losing a sense of momentum due to feeling burnt out from high school and the intensity of their efforts to get into an elite college. Gaining admission to Harvard is notoriously competitive: participants in this study were admitted in a year with an all time low acceptance rate that continued to drop for several years, and an all time high in number of applicants.<sup>7</sup> As a reference point, Harvard most recently accepted 5.9% of 34,295 applicants into the Class of 2018: that is 2,023 success stories and 32,272 rejections (Delwiche, 2014). Increasingly, researchers and the media are questioning the consequences of achievement pressure on young people who participate in the frenzied process to “make the cut”. As one participant explained, getting into an elite college is something that she has been working on “since fifth grade,” and her hard work in high school was also solely devoted to this goal. Therefore, it is possible that some may view college not as a beginning of a journey but the culmination or even end of a long process towards an ultimate goal.

It is well known that the small percentage of students who get in to a place like Harvard are not only models of academic achievement and skilled standardized test-takers, they are also accustomed to being overscheduled in numerous extra-curricular activities (Redding, 2013). Given the ever-increasing competitiveness of gaining admission, demonstrating “well-roundedness” to distinguish oneself is a requirement. Concentrated efforts to cultivate an ideal resumé as part of the profile of a high achieving student can be linked to the Common Application that students complete as part of the application process (Redding, 2013). Whereas previous versions of the Common Application provided four spaces to list extracurricular activities, the current version provides twelve, which signals to

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<sup>7</sup> I refrain from sharing the specific acceptance rates associated with a particular year to protect the identity of participants.

young people and their parents the volume of activity that defines an appropriate level of “well-roundedness” (Niederberger 2012; Redding, 2013; Steinberg, 2010).

Though it may not be surprising, it is alarming that by the time these students make it through the rigor of gaining admission, they feel depleted during their first few years at college. The problem is compounded during freshman and sophomore year, as students tend to reproduce the strategies and measures of achievement to which they have become accustomed, even as some begin to question them. Students like Emily, who changed from science to visual and environmental studies, self-describe as achievement-oriented and continue to look to grades, test scores, and volume of extra-curricular activities as definitional of success. This mindset is a potential barrier to deeper intellectual engagement in her primary area of interest – VES – as she scrambles to meet the requirements of her other commitments which, given her former educational experience, seem to be more salient to her. While research on students’ participation in extra-curricular activities shows the benefits of involvement, these studies assume students are motivated intrinsically (Redding, 2013). In fact, recent studies of students who participate in a high volume of activities because they are driven by external pressures such as resumé-building have shown that these students experience higher levels of stress and anxiety (Melman et. al., 2007 as cited in Redding, 2013). This insight may explain why participants experience sophomore slump despite their heavy extracurricular involvement.

To some extent, participants’ descriptions of feeling a “sophomore slump” match what is documented in the general literature on college student development. “Sophomore slump” is “a stage where students seem to drift through their second year of college as they struggle to determine what they hope to gain from college and establish short- and long-term goals” (Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013, p.541). However, I suggest that there are elements

of sophomore slump that are specific to students operating in the high achievement culture of an elite institution. Early burnout is a serious consequence of the competitive admissions process and students' continued commitment to what they perceive as normalized indicators of success while at college. Participants' descriptions of feeling depleted in energy, motivation, and direction by sophomore year raise pressing questions about the extent to which the competitive admissions process and related conceptions of success actually compromise the college experience itself.

Existing research suggests that increased involvement in the academic and social spheres of the institution can help mediate the negative consequences of sophomore slump, namely student disengagement and attrition (Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). Yet, it is clear that involvement per se is not an issue amongst the participants in my study. According to the literature, an involved student is "someone who expends substantial vigor to studying, spends much time on campus, and interacts frequently with faculty and peers" (Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013, p. 542). Given the immersive residential environment of Harvard College and students' achievement orientation in their academics and extra-curricular activities, students are characteristically overly-involved rather than under-involved.

Furthermore, attrition is also less of an issue at Harvard, with a recent average freshman retention rate of 97.3% ("National Universities Rankings," 2014) and graduation rate of 97% (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2011-2012). These high levels of persistence are likely related to the competition to gain admission in the first place, as well as the resources and brand-name that continue to allure students, despite any feelings of dissatisfaction they might have. While several participants entertained the idea of taking a year off after sophomore year, this did not seem tenable. They feared that if they interrupted their fast pace of life by leaving Harvard, they may never return.

*Overscheduled, In Demand, and Elite*

Operating at an intense pace with a full schedule is a difficult habit to break for participants. As they expressed the desire for more balance, they continued to have trouble turning down opportunities. However, as participants' narratives reveal, their ability to survive and thrive in their hyper-scheduled lives is tested when their scholastic aptitude is challenged by more difficult college-level content and diverse conceptions of teaching and learning. When their coursework unexpectedly became more demanding, requiring additional attention and time than they were used to in high school, students' various commitments suddenly became competing interests.

Yet, even when students began to experience difficulty in any one realm – school work, co-curricular activities, relationships, or personal health – they described continuing at the same pace. In trying to understand the logic behind their persistence even as they spoke of wanting more balance and the need to prioritize their coursework, I arrived at a realization: for these accomplished young people, being overcommitted is a signal of achievement and competitive advantage. Being busy means they are in demand, and it is evidence of their elite status as Harvard students. Therefore, students' decisions about their academics are interconnected with choices they make about these other important realms of their undergraduate life that comprise their identity as Harvard students.

Recent research on elite educational contexts highlight the ways in which an institution can shape how students come to think of themselves as part of an elite status group (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a). In his ethnographic study of an elite boarding school, Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) found that “students often repeated the idea that in order to succeed [there], they had to choose two of the three aspects of their life at the school: they could be really good at their work, they could have a great social life, or they



could get some sleep” (p.24). In such a demanding environment, students must make sacrifices in order to succeed in this particular kind of “culture of excellence” in a context where the barriers between basic spheres of experience are dissolved (p.24). Whereas “a basic social arrangement in modern society is that the individual tends to *sleep*, *play*, and *work* in different places, with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an overall rational plan,” (Goffman, as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, p.24), Gaztambide-Fernández argues that the residential school is a kind of “total” institution in which these ordinarily separate spheres are collapsed. As a residential college, Harvard is also a similar kind of context. The dissolution of boundaries between these basic spheres creates the conditions in which an institution can exert greater influence on how members “think of themselves and accept an institutional identification” (p.24). This explanation can help account for why the narrative of “what Harvard students do” becomes a central part of students’ decision-making, regardless of whether they subscribe to its underlying rationale.

In the case of the elite boarding school, and similarly at Harvard, students’ education consists not only of their academic learning, but also the development and solidification of their membership in an elite status group. For participants in this study, being overscheduled and the seemingly impossible choice of prioritizing basic spheres of experience are an important part of this process of identification, which helps to explain why students keep doing what they are doing despite their stated desire to do otherwise. The period of transition and definition around concentration choice, therefore, not only involves choosing a concentration, but also involves sorting out what it means to be a Harvard student. Part of this process involves managing the tension between acquiring knowledge and acquiring credentials. Often, the distinction between the two can be a blurry line for students who are accustomed to being rewarded for the latter.

*A Sense of Purpose or a Step Up?*

In my interviews with participants, I was struck by the extent to which they struggled to articulate a sense of purpose in relation to their academic pursuits. Purpose is defined as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self” (Damon, 2008, p.33). Purpose can be considered a type of goal that is more “far-reaching and more stable than common lower-level goals” (p.33). It is also more than just a search for personal meaning, it is the “desire to make a difference in the world,” to have an impact beyond the self, and “an ultimate concern” that “drives the shorter term-goals” (p.33). Except for a few exceptions – Louis who is interested in entering politics to contribute back to the social welfare of his hometown, Redwood who is dedicated to finding environmentally-sound energy solutions, and Kayla who seeks to incite social change through her films – the majority of participants did not discuss their goals in terms of purpose.

For participants in this study, gaining admission to an elite college may amount to a purpose. Driven by the desire to achieve elite status conferred through the social and cultural capital of being a student at Harvard, the resultant opportunities for long-term economic gain and stability in the job market is an ultimate concern for many students. But employability and financial gain alone do not satisfy the goals of a liberal arts education.

As Redding (2013) observes, “media focus on declining admission rates and the escalating competition for elite college admission obscures one important fact: most colleges accept most students who apply” (p.33). Yet, soaring numbers of applicants still clamor to win a spot in these most elite institutions because of their exclusivity: As one participant described, with “the percentage of the population with a college degree increasing, I sort of want the biggest step up, or leg up, I can get . And I think, obviously, Harvard is the ultimate

step up. So, basically, I want to graduate and I'll have that step up.” Similarly, observers argue that gaining admission is more broadly viewed as the ultimate achievement, and is a statement of one’s worth and future success:

As nearly every ambitious high school student knows, failure to gain admission to the Ivy League or to one of the nation's other top schools translates into second-class status for life. Indeed, the arrival of the much-anticipated college admissions office envelope represents a moment of truth—a judgment day of sorts when the talented, the impressive, and the worthy, are sorted from the merely average; and hopeful youngsters learn whether they are destined for greatness or for unremarkable, middling lives (Stossel, 2004, para. 1).

A hyper focus on the meaning of admissions detracts from the meaning of the education students receive once admitted. For those who are selected, what is the substance of their education? Participants posed similar questions by the end of their sophomore year and the conclusion of their interview sequence. What will it mean to “walk away from college with a degree that [they will be] proud of” rather than just relying on the prestige of Harvard’s brand-name? According to some, they will be proud if they can take advantage of the opportunities at Harvard without any regrets, including seeking challenges that will push them outside of their comfort zones. It will involve worrying less about “making perfect grades” than they did in high school, where most were accustomed to receiving “all As.” As Kayla described, such a change would be a major shift in comparison to high school, which was “a blur,” something “I did out of robotic necessity, not because I wanted it, not because it's what I really took up for myself.”

Like others, Kayla believes her decision to explore unknown academic areas and move away from being “achievement-focused” is one of the biggest risks she has taken while at Harvard. She has to remind herself constantly of this change in perspective with each decision she makes relating to her studies and future career planning. Amidst the fast paced environment and multitude of competing commitments for time, not only is it easy to lose

sight of one's goals, it is also easy to forego developing new and meaningful ones. Students themselves recognize this challenge, as evidenced in the qualities of a mentor they would like to find. Having someone with "high ideals" who can model how to stay true to these ideals through their life course is important to them.

### *The Pressure of Peers*

The relief of clearing the major hurdle of gaining admission provides only momentary relief for most. Soon after students arrive, the competition continues except now they are in a much smaller pool of similarly high-achieving and talented individuals. For these reasons, students are keenly aware of their peers. Participants identified what they believe is a common misconception about Harvard status: people often assume "you go to Harvard, you can get a really prestigious job at a prestigious place," and it is "smooth sailing" from here on out.

In reality, participants do not feel this sense of reassurance. One student emphatically dispelled the notion of "smooth sailing", and explained: "No. It's so competitive. You're competing against bunch of Harvard students for that position...So, it's not just like, oh, I go to Harvard. Everything from here is easy. Jobs - easy...I don't think they necessarily get that." Another student described the uncertainty of being surrounded by such high achieving peers: "you come here, and you're afraid, and you don't know where you stand." Ironically, while students were seemingly admitted based on their individuality, once they arrive, there is a tendency to conform with their high-achieving peers. Once surrounded by all the smartest people in the room, it makes sense that students seek to emulate or learn from each other's example. Students find themselves in a bind where they are compelled to follow the crowd and learn the general strategy toward academics and future career planning employed by

their peers, even though they may feel uncertain or opposed to a particular goal in the first place.

While previous studies have shown that peers are an influential factor on how students make academic decisions, few describe *how* they are influential. One study showed that a student is “more likely to choose a major when many of her peers make the same choice” (DiGiorgi, Pellizzari, & Redaelli, 2006, p.2). Furthermore, “peers can divert students from majors in which they have a relative ability advantage, with adverse consequences on academic performance, entry wages and job satisfaction” (DiGiorgi et al., 2006, p.2). This insight can help explain some participants’ decision to go with economics even when they are underperforming and/or clearly stronger in other academic realms. It also helps explain why choosing the arts – and going against the grain – is such a challenge that requires the development of a complex counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of practicality. Findings from my study suggest an additional and surprising way in which students learn from their peers – by counter-example. Citing peers most frequently as anti-mentors, students’ observations of their fellow students and the kinds of attitudes and behaviors they resist emulating are telling of the types of challenges they believe they are susceptible to in the context of Harvard. While the choices they make may look the same, students emphasize how they differ in motivation, attitude, and sense of responsibility in order to distinguish themselves from their peers.

### *Liberal arts Education in a Culture of Scarcity*

The findings from this study illuminate the ways in which students in the elite institutional context of Harvard strive to distinguish themselves in the context of a dominant cultural narrative about the economic purpose of college. This rationale translates into a

particular shared belief about how to make the most of a Harvard education that is predicated on indicators of success dictated by market logic. These students, who ‘won’ the admissions race and gained a place amongst the 5.9% of acceptances, make it abundantly clear that their achievement by no means guarantees “smooth sailing” ahead. Rather than viewing their place at Harvard as a hard-earned opportunity to immerse themselves in intellectual, social, and personal exploration and transformation, students find themselves at the precipice of what they view as yet another race to the top. And they must decide whether or not they want to compete.

The predicament students face raises several pressing questions. How and why have positions in investment banking and consulting become the next coveted milestone, perceived by many as the work-equivalent of gaining admission to an elite college? And how is it that students - who were presumably admitted to Harvard on the very basis of their distinct individual profiles and interests - suddenly feel pressured to conform? In a recent NPR broadcast, Deresiewicz (2014) discussed the ways in which the elite admissions process has created an “artificial scarcity of academic resources,” instilling in students and parents a sense that gaining admission into a selective college is a matter of economic survival. The recruiting process of brand-name companies appear to tap into this same mindset before students have a chance to think otherwise, and the cycle is perpetuated. The 2008 financial crisis likely heightened this sense of scarcity for such brand-name jobs. Whereas prior to the crisis, almost 50% of seniors entering the workforce went into jobs in finance and consulting, that percentage dipped to a low of 20% in 2009, and has since increased back to 37% in 2014 (Robbins, 2014).

Time and again I learned from participants how quickly they are exposed to the processes and procedures of recruiting. Their narratives reveal that, typically, students feel

they must make a decision as sophomores as to whether they will participate in the long-term recruiting process that could lead to a full-time job offer by the time they graduate. They described the perceived necessity of securing an internship by the end of sophomore year to initiate a continuous relationship with a firm: a necessary step to securing a future opportunity. If they can forge this relationship by starting early as an intern, they experience a sense of achievement and security to remedy the uncertainty of where their liberal arts education will lead them. Though they may be uncertain as to whether finance and consulting are the right paths for them, the sense of urgency and scarcity created through competition and exclusivity in hiring practices motivate them to participate, even while they have little information as to what this work actually entails. As participants expressed, they are “banking on” the fact that their decisions will work out for them – that they will eventually develop an interest in economics, and that they will in fact, find meaning and engagement in their future work.

In contrast to the efficient messaging from peers and companies of how to participate in campus recruiting and network through clubs and information sessions, students receive relatively little guidance about how to approach their college education. It is assumed that these high achieving students can likewise use their abilities to figure it out for themselves. Students in elite educational contexts are often left to chart their own course. In fact, a *laissez-faire* approach is sometimes perceived as optimal, particularly since students often present as confident, well-organized, and goal-oriented. In other words, they can appear very assured about their plans, and out of respect for their achievements and abilities, advisers do not question them. For example, a senior dean from an elite university “announced proudly that he and his colleagues admit good students and then make a special effort to ‘get out of their way.’ ‘Students learn mostly from one another,’ he argued. ‘We

shouldn't muck up that process'" (Light, 2001, p.2). Such a perspective diminishes the role of institutional influence and moreover detracts from the responsibility of faculty to proactively guide students through this period of education and self-definition.

Findings from this study show that students have an uncertain understanding of what it means to receive a liberal arts education. The self-proclaimed pragmatists believe they have avoided the ambiguity of a liberal arts major by choosing economics as a practical and versatile alternative. In contrast, the arts students draw on a liberal arts philosophy to justify their exploration and risk-taking in choosing what they perceive as an unconventional path. Yet, they are still constrained by the dominant narrative of "what Harvard students do," which de-emphasizes the liberal arts and promotes an instrumental approach. It is possible, therefore, that a laissez-fair attitude towards students might ultimately limit their viewpoints and opportunities, particularly given the dominant cultural narrative about the economic purpose of college, and how determined students' might be about certain trajectories through Harvard simply because they have not been exposed to alternative models.

Possible avenues for future research include studying the impact of students' high school experiences on their adjustment to college. Taking into consideration the various types of high schools students come from, it would be instructive to better understand the shifts in pedagogies of teaching and learning that students experience between high school and an elite liberal arts college. Additionally, further study could be conducted on the impact of participation in the elite admissions process on students' adjustment to and experience of the college context. At such a formative moment in their lives, how does participation in the admissions process shape students' identities and values, and their understanding of the purpose of college? How does the application process shape students' understanding of the



values of the institutions to which they are applying, and how might this impact how they approach their college education? Finally, further research is warranted into the academic and social impact of grouping high achieving peers together in a high-pressure, “brand-name” institutional context. How do these factors impact the ways in which students engage in intellectual exploration and risk-taking in formal classroom settings compared to informal settings such as residential environments? To what extent does this grouping of students promote or hinder intellectual exploration and risk-taking versus the impulse to conform and compete within mainstream definitions of excellence and success?

### III. Concluding Note

In recent months, the very questions at the heart of this study have come under close scrutiny as a result of William Deresiewicz’s book *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and The Way to a Meaningful Life*. Prior to its release, the author published an excerpt in *The New Republic* entitled “Don’t send your kid to the Ivy League: The nation’s top colleges are turning our kids into zombies” (Deresiewicz, 2014). Headlined with an image of a burning Harvard flag, Deresiewicz condemns what he describes as “the entire system of elite education” in the U.S., implicating “everything that leads up to and away from” prestigious selective colleges, including:

Private and affluent public high schools; the ever-growing industry of tutors and consultants and test-prep courses; the admissions process itself...brand-name graduate schools and employment opportunities that come after the B.A.; and the parents and communities, largely upper-middle class, who push their children into the maw of this machine (para. 6).

Deresiewicz argues that this system “manufactures young people who are smart and talented and driven” but risk-averse and lacking in purpose. He describes the students in these elite institutions as “trapped in a bubble of privilege, heading meekly in the same

direction, great at what they're doing but with no idea why they're doing it" (para. 5).

Deresiewicz's claims provoked a range of reactions from faculty and students alike. He has been accused of presenting unsubstantiated over-generalizations (Duva, 2013), of placing too much blame on students and not enough on faculty (Deresiewicz & Lewis, 2014), and of offering "wrongheaded" solutions such as encouraging students to reject the Ivies and attend public institutions instead (Pinker, 2014, para. 9).

Yet there is also a shared recognition that the issues he raises are fundamental concerns across constituents. Many agree that an over-emphasis on credentialism, competition for "brand-name" employment opportunities, and relatedly, narrow definitions of excellence, detract from students' academic learning. Pinker (2014) writes: "Admission to the Ivies is increasingly seen as the bottleneck to a pipeline that feeds a trickle of young adults into the remaining lucrative sectors of our financialized, winner-take-all economy" (para. 2). In an email discussion with Deresiewicz published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Deresiewicz & Lewis, 2014), Lewis acknowledges the "pathological side effects" competition can produce under a skewed concept of excellence (first email, para. 2). But he also counters Deresiewicz's grim outlook with a more optimistic belief that "the research university is the greatest structure ever created for free thought, discovery, and creation" (first email, para. 4). Lewis argues that undergraduates "can and do" engage in free thought, discovery, and creation "at a high level while they are still young enough to have their eyes opened" (first email, para. 4).

Students themselves have expressed varying reactions, including anger coupled with recognition. In a news article discussing Deresiewicz's book tour that brought him to the very institutions he admonishes, a Columbia student in attendance explained that while the criticisms made some of his peers angry, he believed Deresiewicz's "exaggerations" are

“necessary.” He elaborates: “Everything about being at a place like this tells you you’re playing the A game...you need an incendiary person to keep you questioning yourself” (Schuessler, 2014b). Similarly, at Harvard, students gathered for informal discussion on the topic at hand, asking “are we excellent sheep?” Explaining why they decided to participate in one such student-organized discussions, participants chimed in explaining they were there because they happened to agree with a lot of things Deresiewicz is saying (student discussion group, personal communication, September 24, 2014).

The impassioned debates sparked by Deresiewicz’s critique of Ivy League education highlights pressing questions about the purpose and relevance of liberal arts education in an era of economic imperative, the responsibilities of faculty and students for teaching and learning, and the role of elite education in the maintenance of social inequality. The findings from this study contribute a small piece of the puzzle by illuminating how students themselves are thinking about these issues in the context of Harvard.

By employing the lens of new institutionalism, I was able to examine students’ decision-making as embedded in a cultural framework of elite education in a post financial-crisis era. Whereas rational choice theorists focus analysis on “individuals and their strategic calculations,” they do not take into consideration where individual preferences, tastes, and interests come from in the first place (Koeble, 1995, p.232; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The sociological lens of new institutionalism addresses this question by re-framing decision-making as a matter of “choice-within-constraints” resulting in a “context-bound rationality,” as opposed to the context-free approach of rational choice theory (Brinton & Nee, 1998, p.xv). New Institutionalism allows us to examine to what extent context plays a role in individual decision-making by considering the “social structural context within which individual interests and group norms develop” (p.xv).

In this study, I was able to access the role of context in the form of “shared cognitions” and “conventions” that have assumed “rule-like status in social thought and action” at Harvard (DiMaggio & Powell, p.9). These shared cognitions and conventions are captured in an overarching narrative of “what Harvard students do.” This narrative operates at the collective level that informs the logic behind students’ choices. By naming and de-constructing the elements of this shared narrative and the discourse of practicality that students’ take for granted as common sense, I made visible the ways in which context influenced students’ decision-making.

The shared narrative of “what Harvard students do” emerged as a powerful cultural construct associated with the institution of elite education that influenced the individual attitudes and actions of participants, regardless of whether they subscribed to the underlying values upon which the construct is based. For example, the economics students who aspire to work in public service or academia worry they will not be able to avoid what they believe is a more inevitable path toward finance and consulting. The arts students who, despite taking a risk and choosing an area of study that is less collectively valued, struggle with issues of academic legitimacy and non-quantitative measures of achievement. The fact that students are motivated and influenced by a cultural construct that is potentially misaligned with their own developing values and interests is evidence of the ways in which an institution is more than just an aggregate of individual values and behavior, and is not inherently value-free.

The findings in this study illuminate the ways in which institutions, as cultural constructs, can “enable or constrain shared definitions and experiences” and influence individual attitudes (Lamont & Small, 2008, p.89). Participants in both groups had to contend with the shared narrative of “what Harvard students do,” which ultimately had a limiting effect on students’ educational experience. For the economics students, the narrative

served as justification for purposefully disengaging from further intellectual exploration beyond one field of interest in order to stay on track and avoid potential distractions. For the arts students who purposefully explored alternative areas of study in order to be certain about their choice, the narrative served to undermine their decisions and motivate exploration in other subjects - not in the spirit of discovery but as necessary for justifying their unconventional choice. This shared narrative of what they ought to do is compelling to students across the board because they each have a powerful incentive to conform, since “conformity...leads to personal rewards and social esteem due to strength of moral attachment of the community to these norms” (Brinton & Nee, 1998, p.7). Students’ narratives of decision-making in this study reveal the ways in which entrenched norms that signal achievement exert a powerful influence over students’ own conceptions of personal, academic, and professional legitimacy, and influence their decisions even as they question these norms. As one student astutely put it, breaking out of this mold would be to risk societal disapproval.

Deresiewicz (2014) comments on “the irony... that elite students are told that they can be whatever they want, but most of them end up choosing to be one of a few very similar things.” He continues, “as of 2010, about a third of graduates went into financing or consulting at a number of top schools, including Harvard, Princeton, and Cornell. Whole fields have disappeared from view: the clergy, the military, electoral politics, even academia itself, for the most part, including basic science” (para. 24). As young people who came of age during the most recent financial crisis, it is perhaps not surprising that students are particularly concerned about pursuing pathways that appear more likely to lead them to well-paying future jobs. Yet, students themselves are also questioning the extent to which a singular focus on financial return is a sufficient educational goal. They express the desire to

make decisions “for the right reasons,” but they are unsure about what the right reasons might be. Financial status and prestige are not irrelevant or inconsequential considerations: they are important factors that offer clear advantages to those who acquire them. The issue is to what extent those factors have come to define the purpose of elite education over other outcomes, thus encouraging a transactional rather than transformational college experience (Khurana, 2014). The former draws upon a market logic whereby education is considered a service, and students are considered both the customer and product of a brand-name institution. The latter draws upon a democratic logic whereby education is considered a public good for educating responsible community citizens.

Participants in this study, along with the many academic voices debating this issue, suggest that the scale has perhaps tipped too far towards the transactional. This imbalance limits the outcomes of students’ education in several ways, including the creation of a false dichotomy between practicality and happiness. As I have shown, it has become a norm for students to believe that they ought to set aside their engagement to pursue something practical in order to survive and succeed in a context of an “artificial scarcity” of resources.

“What Harvard students do” ought to tell the unique stories of some of the most accomplished students in the world. Yet the narrative that emerged is one constrained by what can be described as a narrow definition of excellence measured by particular markers of achievement. This story, ironically, ends up having less to do with academics and more to do with credentials and branding. Though they were conceivably admitted for their individuality, students’ pull towards conformity is driven by a concern for how they will measure up against each other and to what they perceive as the Harvard brand. But conformity and brand-identity do not necessarily equate to a community identity of shared values.

Based on findings from this study, I would argue that while Harvard's brand identity is strong, its community identity based on shared values in which students believe is weak. The former is evident in the ways in which the cultural construct of "what Harvard students do" perpetuates a manufactured sense of academic and professional scarcity that compels students to focus on individual merit and competition, even sacrificing their current happiness and engagement for the promise of a future reward. The latter is evident in the ways in which students de-identify with their 'group identity' as Harvard students, and even think of each other as anti-mentors. An achievement culture that primes students to think about their peers as competitors for limited resources ultimately promotes self-interest and individualism over community. What genuinely feels like survival mode to students potentially translates into what Pinker (2014) describes as a "winner take all" mentality: climb to the top first, examine your interests, values, and beliefs later, if at all. In actuality, this frame of survival and winning threatens to delay or even prevent the very work that is meant to occur in a liberal arts education. It creates instead a pipeline from a brand-name education to brand-name work opportunities, and is one way in which institutions such as Harvard plays a role in the maintenance of social inequality. As one student astutely summarizes: "I think people would come here or send their kids here even if they didn't really believe in liberal arts education because they believe in the brand, or they really think that the brand is going to get them somewhere, which may actually, probably be true in a lot of cases."

There is an apparent contradiction between external and internal characterizations of students from institutions such as Harvard. While critics like Deresiewicz describe them as "excellent sheep," seemingly uniform from afar, students themselves identify each other as anti-mentors, and seek to individuate themselves from the flock. Though they may be vying

for similar opportunities and following similar pathways, students believe the reasoning behind their decisions justifies their actions and differentiates them from the rest. I have come to make sense of this contradiction in the following way. I suspect that the uniformity comes from students' desire to brand themselves with the Harvard name. The drive to accomplish this branding motivates students to do what they believe they ought to do as Harvard students, whether they believe in this narrative or not. In justifying their decision to conform to this process of acquiring a brand identity, students view each other as gauges for whether they are making this decision for "the right reasons." They hold a general conception that doing something for "pure financial gain" is "the wrong reason," and thus seek additional ways to justify their choice.

Despite the weight of Harvard's brand-name and the impact of the shared narrative on students' experiences, participants' own narratives reflect the immense efforts they put into negotiating their individual positions within this context. As they strategize about each step of their decision-making, they also navigate the various pressures and expectations tied to their identities as high achieving, Ivy League students, and their emerging identities as learners, workers, and community citizens. Some even recognize the ways in which the brand-name of a place like Harvard might cloud their judgment and/or unduly influence how others' might perceive them. As one art history student explains:

I was really, really worried, when I went into the college process... I really didn't want to go to an Ivy League school because the idea of a brand kind of terrified me. It really made me worry that I would have to question my own motives in going here. I really didn't like the idea of the brand, and I think that it does create that sense that it doesn't matter what you major in... People will jump to my defense with, "Well, it doesn't matter what she majors in because it's going to say on her degree that she went to Harvard, so she can go [work] wherever..." That's not the way that I want to be defending what I am doing.



While it is arguable that the brand allows students greater freedom to explore academically because the weight of the brand itself will make students employable post-graduation, the findings reveal that this proposed freeing-effect is not what students actually experience. Instead, they feel tied to upholding the standard measures of achievement, namely economic and resultant social prestige. The findings also provide examples of how breaking away from this mode requires tremendous effort and is perceived by students as a risk. Further, the brand can overshadow the substance of the degree. It potentially creates a sense that “it doesn’t matter what you major in”, not as a reason to explore one’s interests, but as a further reason to pursue a path that most others are pursuing as a default.

I can think of several implications for practice that the findings from this study suggest. At the institutional level, there is an opportunity to make the mission of the College, along with the purposes of a liberal arts education, more explicit to students so that they may have the language and framework to assess their own values and beliefs about what they want to make of their time at college. Participants in this study clearly show that they have a desire to examine these questions in more depth, but perhaps lack the time and tools to so, in addition to mentors to guide and challenge them. The College has recently begun to pilot new initiatives to address these issues, including “Opening Days Discussion”, which took place in September 2014. All incoming freshman participated in small faculty-led discussions about the purpose of a liberal arts education. According to the new Dean of Harvard College, Rakesh Khurana and Dean of Undergraduate Education, Jay Harris, the aim of this discussion was to examine “the transformative power of a liberal arts education.” In an email inviting faculty to participate, they wrote:

In this pivotal historical moment when the methods and purposes of education are hotly contested, and when students wonder how to prepare for an uncertain future, we think it critical to open a dialogue with our newest students about our core educational mission and the very meaning of a liberal arts education. What is a

Harvard education good for? What besides a successful career? How can a student's four years in the College develop both mind and character? How can education help students both achieve personal fulfillment and contribute to our society? Is there such a thing as useless knowledge? (J. Harris & R. Khurana, personal communication, May 22, 2014).

At the center of these discussions is the question of community and citizenship, and the connections between the intellectual, personal, and social dimensions of a liberal arts education. Bringing these issues to the attention of faculty and providing guidelines for how to discuss these questions with students is an important start.

Furthermore, findings from this study support the idea that students would benefit from additional opportunities to examine their values and beliefs in more explicit and sustained ways over time. Whether in the form of interventions, workshops, or required programming, the opportunity to talk about money, financial planning, and lifestyle, including the question of “how much is enough” with supporting data and examples would help directly address one of the main concerns on many students minds. Providing this knowledge and helping students disentangle their academic decisions from their financial concerns might help them feel more informed and able to take intellectual risks.

Additionally, I would argue that findings in this study make a strong case for pre-college advising on the possibility for students to take a gap year between high school and college. A gap year could be valuable time to gain working experience and vocational skills, while also re-energizing post-high school in order to begin college with a fresh perspective and new experiences to inform their learning. Such a strategy may help ease the adjustment of the transition from high school to college and temper students' experience of sophomore slump and burnout in their second year of College, allowing them to maximize their time and experience. Finally, I would argue for working with students to shift away from thinking about education through a framework of credentialism or even detached intellectualism to a

framework of autobiography. Autobiography is arguably the ultimate context as well as a framework for meaningful, reflective and purposeful action. Rather than fueling an environment in which students feel they must limit their interests and conceal their insecurities and diversity in order to conform to a narrow definition of success, a focus on the role of autobiography in education has the potential to encourage students' to personalize their educational experience and discover their unique pathway through Harvard.

In this study, I have identified the shared narrative of “what Harvard students do” so that it may be interrogated as a cultural construct informed by specific values and beliefs about the economic purpose of an elite education. By naming this narrative as a central feature of the context of Harvard, it is then possible for students to examine critically the ways in which this construct informs the choices they make about their education and future work, while developing their own beliefs about what they are at college to accomplish. Importantly, this study also points to the ways in which sharpening the messaging around the purpose of a liberal arts education may provide an important counterpoint for students, who come already entrenched with knowledge of the Harvard brand, and certain expectations of a “return on investment” from their Harvard education. As they arrive immersed in the customs of an achievement culture that values test scores, grades, and extracurricular activities as a form of credentialism that arguably predisposes students to value Harvard as a brand, another opportunity to provide a constructive counterpoint is for the institution to emphasize the mission and educational philosophy of the College. As I have demonstrated, students do not necessarily arrive at Harvard with a strong understanding of a liberal arts rationale to apply to their education. But they do have a clear sense of an economic rationale and what is rewarded by the achievement culture around

which the system of elite education is built. In the absence of a clear competing narrative, the dominant shared narrative too easily becomes a default basis for decision-making.

## Appendices

### APPENDIX A

#### Recruitment Letter

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and I'm writing to see if you would be interested in participating in a research study. For my dissertation, I am interviewing sophomores to learn more about how they choose their concentrations. I would like to learn more about your experiences as a student at this milestone moment, as well as your current and future goals.

If you would consider participating in this study, please email me to find out more. Participation will involve meeting for three interviews for approximately one hour each. The interviews will be spaced out over the year at times that are convenient for you - the first occurring in October-November, the second in January-February, and the third during April-May. I will be able to offer \$100 in gift cards for your participation (\$30 Amazon gift card for 1<sup>st</sup> interview, \$30 Amazon gift card for 2<sup>nd</sup> interview, and \$40 gift card for 3<sup>rd</sup> interview).

Thanks so much for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,  
Tiffanie Ting  
tiffanie\_ting@mail.harvard.edu

**APPENDIX B****INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #1  
CURRENT PROCESSES OF DECISION-MAKING**

1. How has your sophomore year been going so far?
  2. So in a few weeks, you will be declaring your concentration – how have you gone about figuring out what you will declare?
    - Did you know what you wanted to concentrate in before coming to Harvard?
    - How did you figure it out? Was there a moment or a specific experience (before Harvard, or while at Harvard) that made you realize, that's what I want to concentrate in?
  3. Has this been an easy or challenging experience for you?
    - If easy – why do you think it has been an easy experience for you? How were you prepared? Why do you think it is hard for some people?
    - If challenging – how has it been a challenging experience? Can you give me an example?
    - What's been the hardest part about making this decision?
  4. What would you say have been the biggest influences in making this decision?
    - courses; advising; faculty; family
    - probe for examples of specific courses, relationships, realizations
  5. How have your friends been going about choosing a concentration? Similar to you or do you think people have different approaches?
  6. What do your parents think about your choice?  
What do they do for a living?  
How has your family background influenced the way you approach your education?
  7. How, if at all, are you considering your future career when you think about what concentration to choose?
  8. How confident do you feel about your choice right now (1-10) Would you consider switching?  
Are there other concentrations that you wish you could explore but haven't? Why not?
- 
9. What attracts you to this area of study?
  10. What questions or doubts do you have about your area of study?
  11. Do you have any role models of people studying / working in this field?

12. If you had to explain to someone completely unaware of your field of study what it is about, and why it is important to society, what would you say?

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13. What does it mean to be a \_\_\_\_\_ concentrator at Harvard? What's the reputation of your concentration?

- Do you think that's accurate? Why or why not?
- Do you identify with this?

14. How do you think being a \_\_\_\_\_ concentrator will influence your overall experience for the rest of your time at Harvard?

15. Hear that concentrations have different reputations, perceived level of difficulty – recently GOV dept has come under scrutiny because of the case “inappropriate collaboration” that got a lot of news coverage

- What's your understanding of what happened?
- Who do you think is responsible?

## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #2 REFLECTION ON DECISION

Nice to see you again!

1. How is your semester going so far? Any big changes between this semester and last semester?
2. Last time we met, you were about to declare your concentration and we talked about how you went about deciding what to concentrate in - how did things end up playing out? What did you declare?
3. What have you learned about yourself in this process of choosing a concentration?
4. What were some of the main things you were weighing when making this decision?
5. Do you feel you have had to make any compromises along the way?
6. What, if any, are the unique opportunities / drawbacks of studying \_\_\_\_\_ at Harvard?

#### **Academic experience**

7. So I invited you to bring in an example of work you did in a course related to your concentration that you are particularly proud of: what did you bring?
  - a. Tell me about this work – Walk me through what you did.
  - b. Why are you particularly proud of this?
  - c. What did you learn in the process of creating this work? What do you value about it?
  - d. Does it say something about who you are or what you want to do?
  - e. What class is it from? How has this course been important to you?
8. Based on the courses you have taken so far in your concentration:
  - a) What do you have an appreciation for that you didn't have before?
  - b) What have you learned that you think you will use in the future?
9. What expectations did you have about your concentration?  
Have they been met so far? What has yet to be met?
10. What does good quality work in your field look like? What criteria?

#### **Connection between Academics and rest of college life: Diagram exercise**

11. What is the relationship between your academic pursuits with the other components of your college life?
12. What do you hope to get out of your academic experience in College? In general?



**LIFE AT COLLEGE**

1. Use the BLACK pen to draw a representation of the different components of your life at college.
  - Include the approx. number of hours you spend on each per week.
2. Use the COLORFUL PENS to show
  - how important each component is to you AND
  - how they are related to each other, if at all.

## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL#3: END-OF-YEAR INTERVIEW

1. Nice to see you again! How is your term wrapping up?
2. Reflecting on the year – what are some major highlights, lowlights?
3. What are your plans for the summer?  
How do your summer plans relate, if at all, to what you are studying?  
How do they relate to what you hope to do in the future?
4. Reflecting on your first two years of college:  
What has been the most valuable experience so far?  
(As for examples from academic life, Extra-curricular life, Current/future work life).
- 5.. What do you know now about studying [concentration] that you didn't know before?  
- Or what attracts you to this area of study?
6. What's the biggest risk you have taken so far since come to Harvard? Why was it a risk?  
What was at stake?  
- Prompt if needed: Or what have been some other risks outside of your time here that feel big to you?
7. What has been your greatest success so far since coming to Harvard?
8. What does success mean to you now? Now and in the future? How will you measure whether you have been successful in your life?
9. What uncertainties do you have? What are the things on your mind that keep you up at night?
10. What do you think is currently MISSING from your educational experience so far?
11. Who is your braintrust? If you had to appoint at least 3 people to be your "braintrust" – people who you think of as your main advisers for the different aspects of your life, who would they be?  
- ask generally; and then follow with prompts.  
- Who do you talk to specifically about courses, careers, how to go about xyz, how to spend your summer, personal relationships etc.
12. a) Do you have any mentors? Who are they and why do you consider them a mentor?  
- Or, if no mentors, what kind of mentor would you hope to find?  
b) Do you have any anti-mentors? (people who are the opposite of a mentor)
13. a) What do you think made you stand out in your application to Harvard?  
- Maybe differentiate asking about this from their perspective as a senior in high school versus now as a sophomore.

b) What do you think will make you stand out *after* your time at Harvard?

14. To whom or what do you feel responsible?

**APPENDIX E****WRITING EXERCISE 20-30 mins****What is your legacy?**

How would you like to be remembered as a **person**? A **worker**? And a **citizen**?

- What is your plan for achieving your legacy?
- What actions have you taken to begin enacting this plan?
- What resources support you?
- What challenges or obstacles do you face?

**Closing question:**

One of the former Deans of Harvard College wrote recently that part of the purpose of college is to develop “people of good character who will know that they owe something to society for the privileged education they have received” (Lewis, 2006, p.x11). How do you interpret this? What do you think he means? Do you agree or disagree?

Anything you’d like to add?

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**APPENDIX F**

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE	
Name	
Year of Birth	
Place of birth	
Hometown (where you grew up)	
Citizenship	
Gender	
How do you identify racially / ethnically	
What high school did you go to	
Number of siblings (older and younger)	
Other family members attend Harvard?	
Mother level of education	
Mother occupation	
Father level of education	
Father occupation	
Current G.P.A.	
Are you on financial aid?	
Preferred pseudonym	

## APPENDIX G

## CODEBOOK

\* These codes come directly from questions that were asked  
 \*\* These codes could also be coded with an additional search for the term / variation of the term within the text eg. Practicality, practical.  
 Highlights in green: record responses on spreadsheet

CODE	DESCRIPTION
Background	Any extremely relevant background info not captured in other codes
Great Quotes	Great Quotes
<b>Interview 1</b>	
Freshman Year	Descriptions of their approach to, experience of freshman year / did they know what they wanted to concentrate in when they arrived?
Dept/Field	Descriptions of their understanding of / what they are learning about their concentration area / field and relatedly, characteristics of their department at Harvard
High School	References to High School experiences, particularly how they shaped approach to college and choosing field of study
Pivotal Moment*	Descriptions of particularly poignant event, experience, idea that helped them decide on their concentration
Achievement	Description that references idea of culture of achievement including importance of getting good grades, competition, busyness etc.
Engagement	Description of feeling of engagement, enjoyment, interest in academics as well as any other significant realms of life at college
Happiness**	References to / description of concept of happiness
Considering Alternatives	References to any considerations of alternative options different from what they think they are going to study.
Multipotentiality / Options	References to idea of being good at many things, how manage being so good at so many different things, difficulty making decision / commitment to one area of focus, feeling like having to give up something, indecision, “wanting to keep options open”
Time	Particular emphasis on thinking about the future, particular emphasis on thinking about the present, references to how time may be a factor in their decision-making
Practicality**	References that help explain their idea of what they consider “practical”
Harvard / Resources	Any Harvard-specific references
Liberal Arts**	Any references to their idea of what it means to get a Liberal Arts Education
Career	Any references to jobs, careers
Identity	Any references to their sense of identity and how it has informed, evolved, changed etc in this process of concentration choice, college in general.
Role models	Explicit or implicit references to any role models, people who have been influential in shaping their thinking
Cheating Scandal*	Code for entire response to this question (2 <sup>nd</sup> last question in interview #1)

<b>Interview 2</b>	
Compromise*	References to anything they feel they have had to compromise in educational experience so far.
Big Decision*	Code for response to this question
What do you hope to get out of college*	Code for response to this question
Salary*	Code for response to this question, record specific amount
Summer	Code for responses to this question, record activity
Mapping Time	Code for entire response to this question
<b>Interview 3</b>	
Mentors*	Code for response to this question, record who
Anti-mentors*	Code for response to this question, record who
Success *	Code for response to this question
Risks*	Code for response to this question
Standing out pre-harvard*	Code for response to this question
Standing out post-harvard*	Code for response to this question
Responsibility*	Code for response to this question, record who
Owing to society*	Code for response to this question
Missing from education*	Code for response to this question
Uncertainties**	Code for response to this question
Know now did not know before*	Code for response to this question
Advice to Freshmen*	Code for response to this question
Braintrust*	Code for response to this question, record who
Lowlights*	Code for response to this question
Highlights*	Code for response to this question

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